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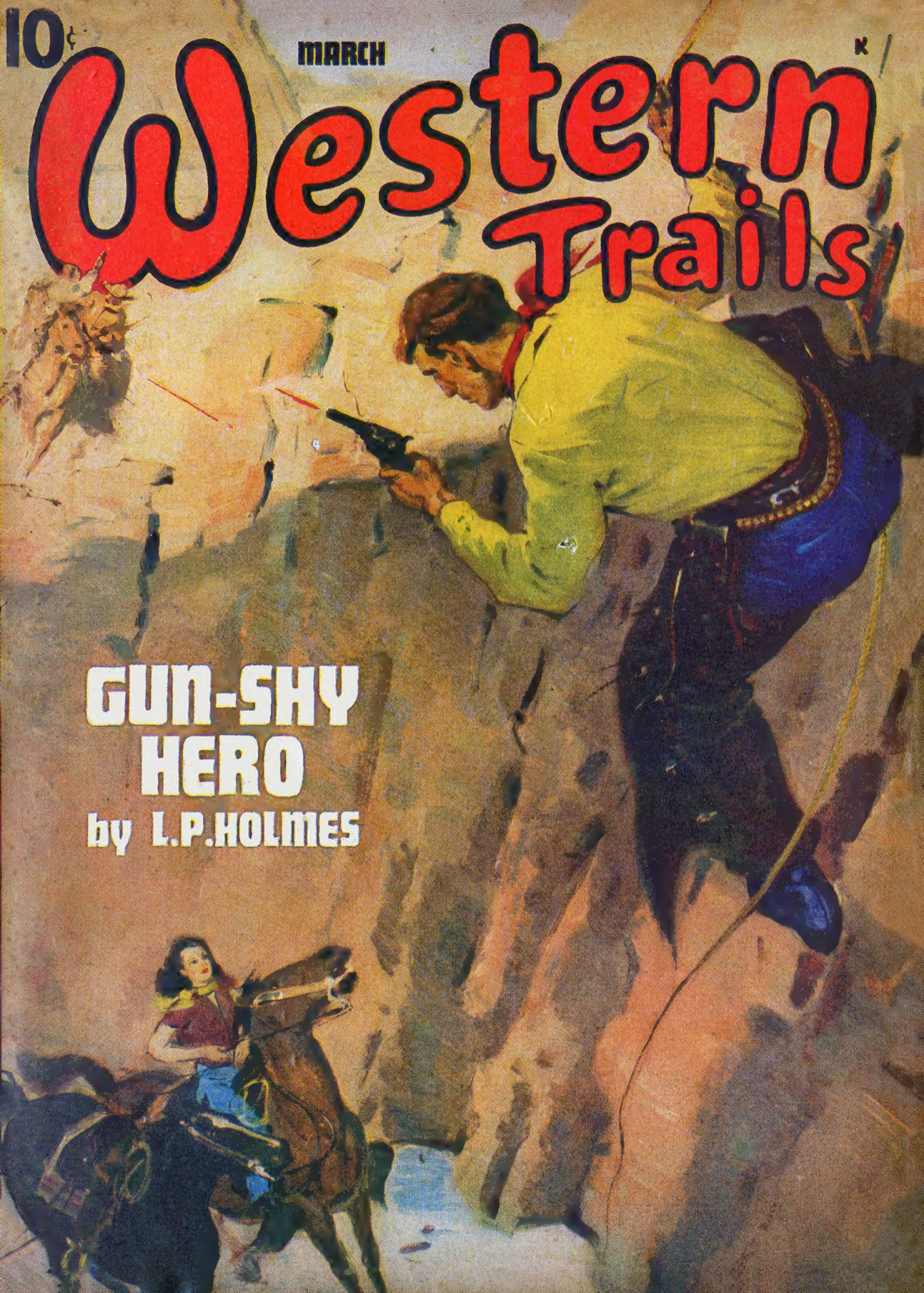
Western Trails



GUN-SHY HERO

by L.P.HOLMES

Alin Overcame More Than One Handicap When . . .

ALIN WILSON IS WELL IN THE LEAD AS HE ENTERS THE LAST FIVE-MILE STRETCH OF THE FAMOUS SNOW-KING SWEEPSTAKES, WHEN . . .

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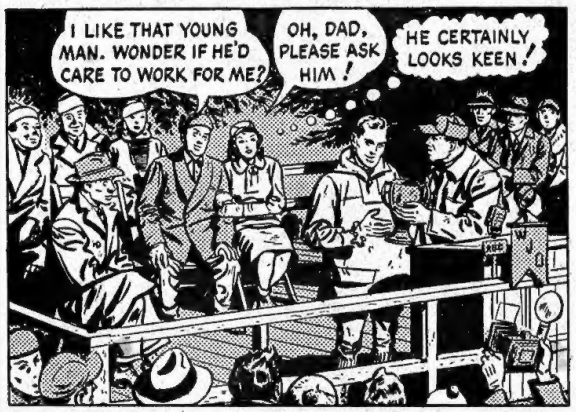

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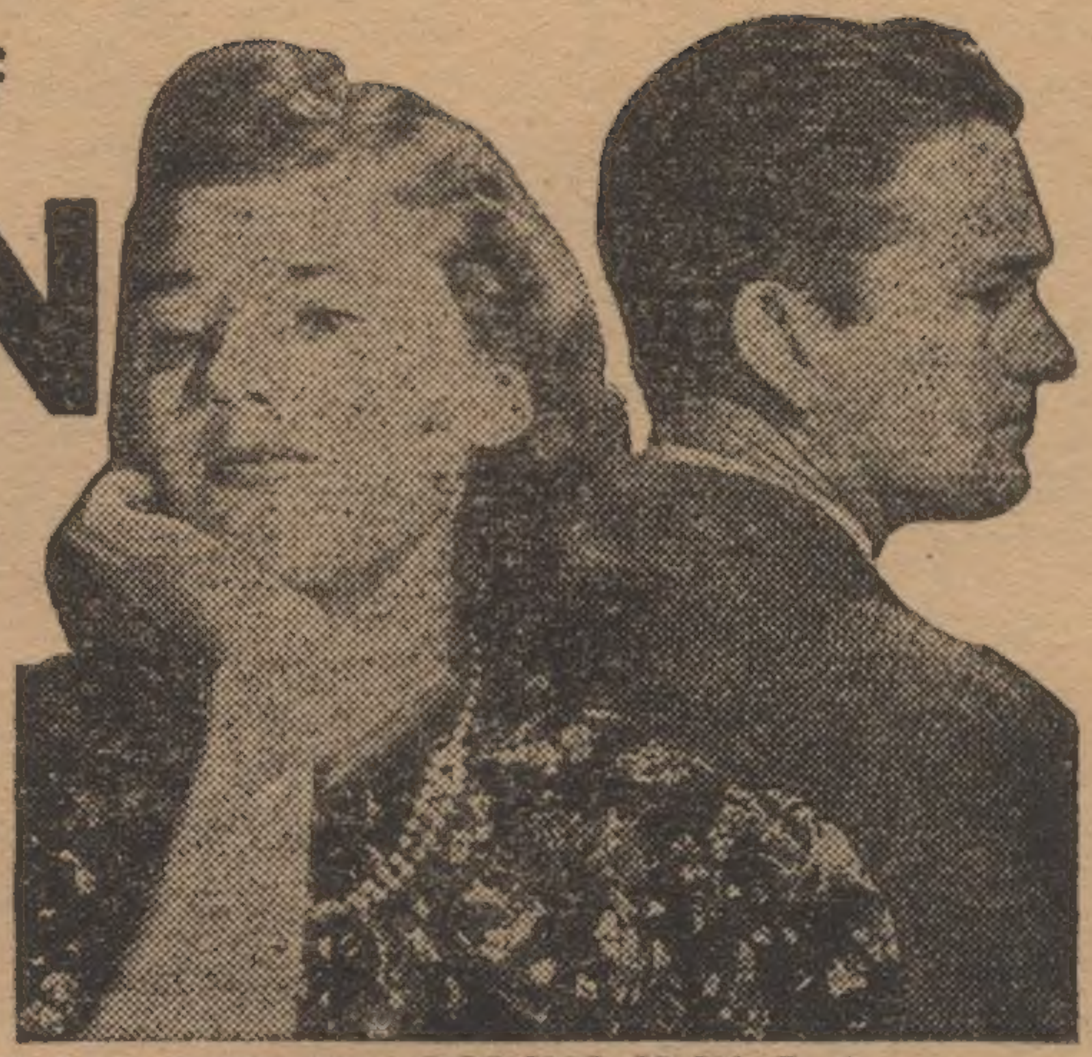

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Don't murder your skin by squeezing it. Skin is delicate. When you break it, you leave yourself wide open to miseries. It's far easier, far safer, to let the Double Viderm treatment help you enjoy a handsome, clear and blemish-free complexion.

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Mar. 1947

Western Trails

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An ACE Magazine

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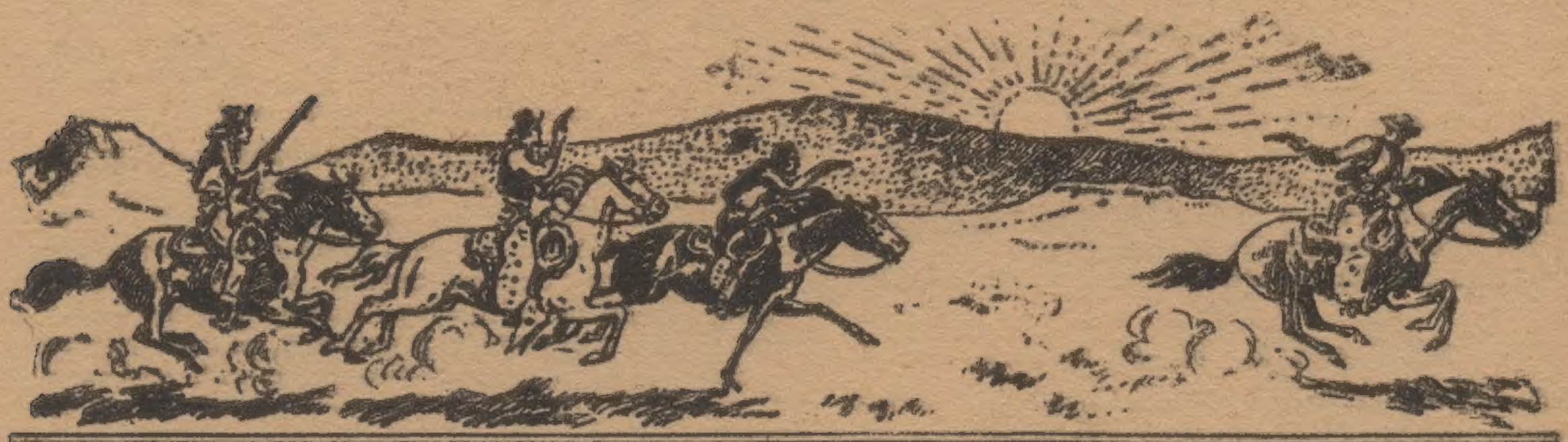

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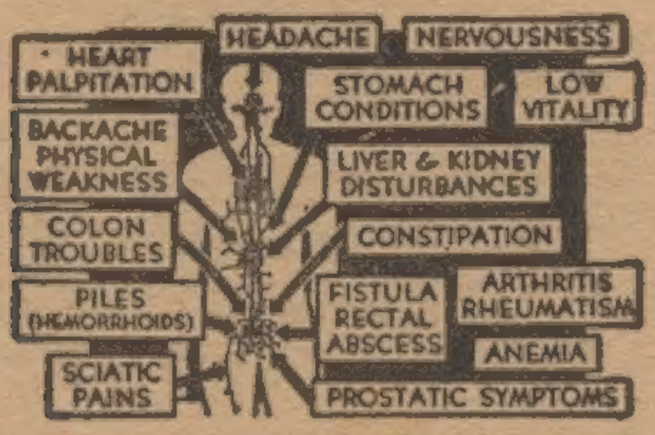

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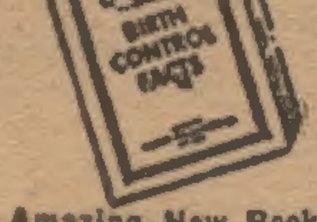

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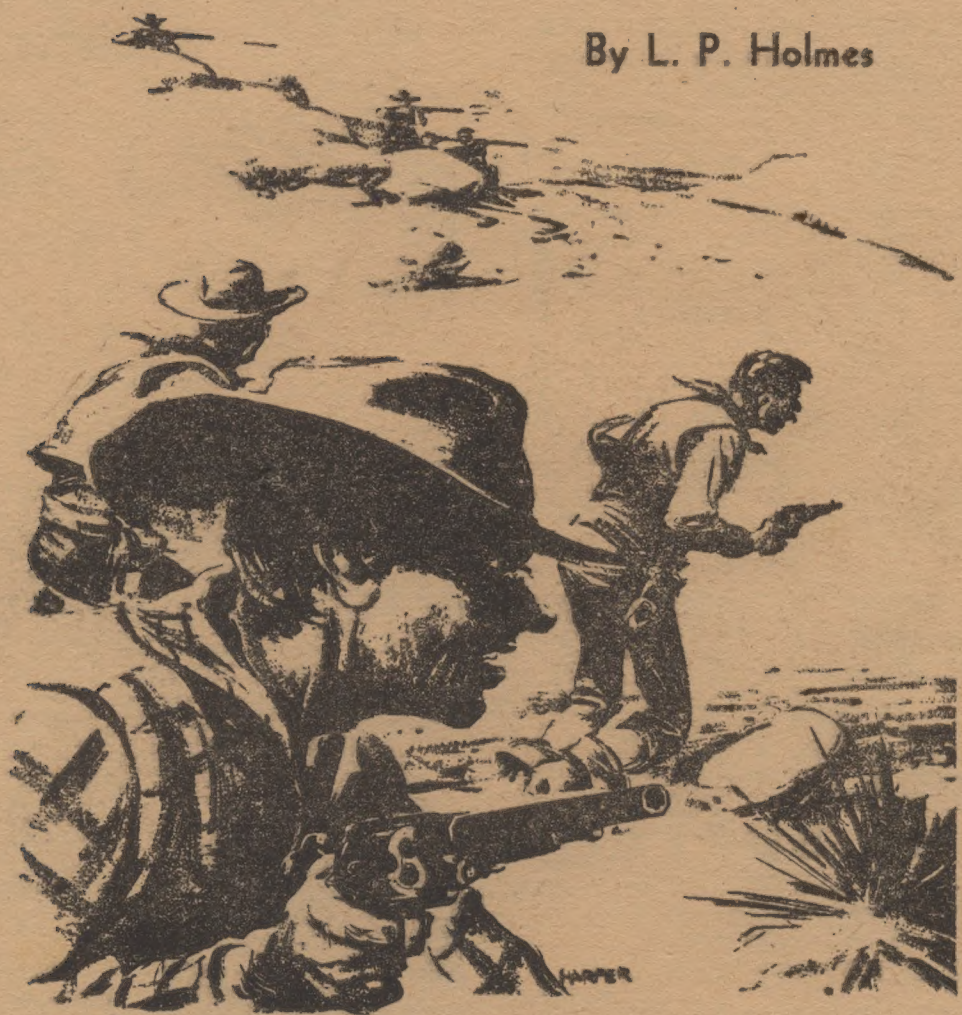
Gun-Shy Hero

By L. P. Holmes



Gripping Range Novelette

IT WAS around three miles across the sagebrush flats from the wagon road to the lonely, weather-beaten little railroad station. For the greater part of that distance Rick Linton swung along with an easy, effortless stride, head up, eyes keen and observing, lips pursed in a soft, musical whistle.

But when close enough to the station to observe the ground-reined saddle pony standing in the shade of the station buildings, Rick's manner changed. The easy spring went out of his stride, became more of a shuffle. The erectness left his shoulders; both they and his head sagged. There was something almost hangdog about him as he crossed the tracks and paused uncertainly on the sun-warped, splintery station platform.

To hide his saddle sleuth mission, Rick Linton had to play a coward's role in that livestock swindle. But just when Rick was ready to make his six-gun showdown, he was trapped by drygulch disaster.

For a moment his glance rested on the saddle pony, marked the brand it carried, a Cloverleaf. A faint gleam brightened his eyes before they again became lackluster. Then he shuffled into the station.

A rider was in there, talking to the girl beyond the wicket. A big, burly rider. Bo Reeder, who turned at the sound of Rick Linton's shuffling step. Reeder stared, laughed and said in open contempt:

"Look what just sneaked in out of the sage, Jinny. A real, two-legged coyote, so yellow the whole world turns saffron when he's around. Want that I should throw him out?"

The girl beyond the wicket was startlingly pretty, even though a settled gravity unusual in one of her years, lay about her clear eyes and soft red mouth.

She said brusquely, "That will do, Bo Reeder. You've no right to talk that way about anyone who comes into this station." Her glance measured Rick Linton. "Something I can do for you?"

Rick bobbed his head humbly. "Thought maybe you might have a job open for a man of all work, ma'am. I can turn a hand to most anything."

She studied Rick with new intentness. "There is a job open," she admitted. "Division Headquarters at Caspar authorized it only a couple of months ago. But," she added doubtfully, "I hardly think it would interest you. It doesn't pay very much. Twenty-five a month and found."

"A job is what I need, what I got to have," said Rick. "I'll take it."

BO REEDER gave his sarcastic laugh again. "That's the same whine he put up to Sam Geddes, Jinny. Sam put him on, helping the cook. Inside of two weeks every rider in the outfit had made him crawl, even that punk kid, Lefty. And when finally old Blackie the cook got disgusted and took out after him with a dish mop, this feller run, actually run, to get away from Blackie. That finished Sam Geddes.

"Sam fired him, saying he drew a line when it came to having anything that was pure coyote on the payroll. No, you don't want this feller around, Jinny. You want something that is at least part way a man. Look!"

Bo Reeder stepped toward Rick Linton, clenched fist upraised and threatening. Rick Linton cowered and dodged away so hurriedly he floundered and almost fell over his own feet. Bo Reeder spat, as though ridding his mouth of something unpleasant to the taste.

"You see?" he said.

The girl looked at Rick Linton with a faint shade of pity in her eyes, pity that was heavily overshadowed with contempt.

"I never let on as being a fighting man," pleaded Rick Linton humbly. "But I sure can work."

"There is work to be done and I really do need someone to do it," the girl said. "But I don't think you will do. Sorry."

Rick Linton twisted his battered hat with desperate hands. "I sure can work," he mumbled. "If you'd just gimme the chance to show—"

"Git!" growled Bo Reeder. "You heard what Jinny Carr said. There's no job here for such as you. Git!"

Bo Reeder aimed a kick which barely missed, as Rick Linton dodged out the door. At that moment the telegraph key on the desk behind the girl began to click and Bo Reeder said with satisfaction:

"Maybe that's the market reports coming in from Crespi, Jinny."

The girl nodded, turning to the key. "That is Crespi calling."

Outside the station house, Rick Linton leaned dejectedly against the wall, while he sifted the last grains from a limp Durham sack, spun a thin cigarette into shape and inhaled deeply.

The afternoon sun was hot and laid a parched odor over everything. Along the railroad tracks west of the station lay a spread of corrals and a loading chute, touched by a siding that curved away from the main line steel. Beside the corrals was a pile of new lumber, heavy planks and posts, evidently intended for obviously needed repair of the corrals.

There was a boarded-up water tower, painted red, with a big tank and windmill on top. There were a few sheds. And that, along with the station house and platform made up the cattle shipping point and occasional water stop station of Signal Butte.

With shadowed eyes, Rick Linton took in these surroundings while inside the station the telegraph key clacked steadily, the sound thin and metallic in the hot air. Its stopping, as suddenly as it had begun its clatter, seemed to stir Rick Linton from gloomy, discouraged thoughts. He caught up the battered canvas sack which held his meager personal belongings and shuffled off along the tracks toward the water tower. He was just passing it when Bo Reeder came clanking out, forked his saddle, and spurred away to the north.

A MILE east of Signal Butte the railroad crossed a narrow, steep-banked arroyo by means of a wooden trestle. The bulk of this laid a modicum of shade during the hot part of the day and under it the hobo had slept off his drunk. Now, with the afternoon running along the hobo awakened, reached for

his bottle, found it empty, threw it aside with a heavy curse. He sat for a time, hunched and blowzy, then climbed out of the arroyo and started along the tracks for Signal Butte.

He was gross and brutish, with a heavy, rolling stride. He'd heard talk along the line about the girl station agent at Signal Butte. Whisky, several good, heavy jolts of it, was what he wanted most. There probably wouldn't be any at Signal Butte, but there should be food, which was next best. And that lone girl better not get uppish or sassy with him . . .

Some time after the hobo crawled out from under the trestle, the girl came out of the station house. She had changed from feminine apparel to hickory shirt and striped bib overalls. Her head was bare and shone warmly brown in the sunlight.

She struggled along under the weight of a box of tools, containing saws, hammer, spikes, T-square and auger. She laid this down beside the pile of new lumber, pulled on a pair of old gloves and started measuring off a two-by-six plank as a replacement for a corral rail that had been smashed by some wild charging bovine member of a shipping herd in the not too distant past.

The plank was heavy and taxed her slim strength severely as she tried to lift it into place and hold it there long enough to spike one end to a post.

Rick Linton came around from behind the water tower and said quietly, "That's a man's work. Let a man do it."

She was startled and would have dropped the plank if Rick hadn't grabbed it. "I—I thought you had gone," she stammered.

"Came back," explained Rick succinctly. "Aimed to have another try at getting that job."

"Maybe you waited until you were sure that Bo Reeder had gone?" There was a definite tinge of contempt in her tone.

Rick did not seem to hear her. "I'll show you I can work. Here, gimme that hammer and some spikes."

Before she could object, he had them. He set the heavy plank into place, held it there with his leaning weight, drove the spikes home with solid, accurate hammer blows.

"There! Where does the next one go?"

She indicated the place, stood back and watched him soberly. This one had to be sawed to fit. He handled the tools deftly and the heavy planks effortlessly, for his shoulders were wide and well packed with lean, solid muscle.

Abruptly she asked, "When did you eat last?"

"This morning," Rick told her truthfully enough. "I wangled breakfast from the nester family who brought me down the wagon road from Round Valley."

"Regular suppertime is close to seven, after Jack and Pudge, my younger brother and sister get home from school. That is still hours away. I'll get you a bite now."

"Then," asked Rick, "I get the job?"

"We'll see."

She went back to the station house, part of which was living quarters. Rick Linton smiled briefly to himself as he got to work on another plank. He even whistled softly between his teeth.

The girl's cry reached him, indignant, yet touched with quick terror. Rick dropped everything, went up to the station house at a long, loping run. He came around the end of it and saw the girl, trying to fight off the filthy, pawing hands of a frowzy, gross-bodied hobo.

THE hobo glimpsed Rick's hard charging bulk, swung snarling to meet it. He got around just in time to take a hurtling fist full in the center of the face. The hobo went over backward, rolled twice, came back up, a knife in his hand. He made a pawing slash at Rick as Rick came in on him again, and slit Rick's left shirt sleeve from wrist to shoulder, the sharp steel barely kissing Rick's forearm on the way, leaving the burn of a shallow wound in its wake.

Rick caught the hobo's wrist, jerked over and back, almost dislocating the arm. The hobo bawled in sudden agony, dropped his knife. Then Rick went after

him savagely, clubbing him with wicked, chopping fists. He beat the hobo to the edge of the platform and knocked him off it cleanly with a final solid smash that came from way back.

The hobo rolled and floundered, dazed and bloody and unable to get up. Over his shoulder, Rick rapped a sharp question at the girl. "Got a gun in that station—a rifle, maybe?"

"Y-yes. But—"

"Get it!"

She brought the Winchester out and put it in Rick's hand just as the battered hobo finally got back to his feet. Rick swung the weapon in a deadly arc.

"You got five minutes to get out of rifle range," he told the hobo harshly. "Five minutes, no more. If you're still in range then, I start shooting. Travel!"

The hobo did not argue. He went west along the tracks, moving at a shambling run, both hands pressed to his battered, bleeding face. When the hobo had covered a couple of hundred yards and was still going, Rick relaxed and turned to the girl.

"Do I get that job?"

She was very big of eye, and solemn, as she stared at him. The brown head nodded. "You get the job . . ."

The first powder-blue shadows were sliding across the world when a fat, patient old mare came jogging up through the sagebrush from the south, bearing on her broad back a stalwart boy of eleven and a round-cheeked, rosy girl of eight.

"Jack and Pudge—this is Rick Linton," introduced Jinny Carr. "He is going to work for us. You won't have to milk the cows tonight."

"Why not?" argued Jack, proud of his eleven-year-old ability. "I've milked 'em up to now."

Rick Linton grinned at the boy. "Make a deal with you, Jack. You milk one, I'll milk the other. Fair enough?"

The boy looked him over solemnly, nodded. "You milk Whitey. I'll handle Ginger. Ginger, she's kinda skittish around strangers."

The cows had come plodding in through the sage, bells tinkling. Rick had already put them in one of the sheds, fed them. Now, while he and the youngster milked them, casual, but deft questions got the boy to open up.

Jim Carr, the father, agent at Signal Butte for many years, had died some ten months previously from injuries sustained by falling from a car during the make-up of a cattle train. From there Jinny Carr had taken over, being given her father's job as reward for his years of faithful service.

It had been tough, Jack admitted with youthful soberness. But he added that Sam Geddes, up in Round Valley, had offered him a riding job, soon as he turned fifteen. Then, declared the youngster stoutly, he'd take care of Jinny and Pudge.

II

QUESTIONED about Sam Geddes, the boy grew almost lyrical. Sam Geddes was just about the greatest man in the world to Jack Carr. Why, Sam Geddes had given them these two cows, Whitey and Ginger. He had given them Suzie, the old mare that he and Pudge rode back and forth to school on. He had done them all kinds of favors, which was one of the reasons why big sister Jinny didn't mind taking the market reports for Sam Geddes as they were sent in over the telegraph wire from Bob Lowe, the agent up at Crespi. And most likely when big sister Jinny got around to thinking of marrying, she'd pick one of Sam Geddes' riders, maybe Bo Reeder.

Later, on the way back to the station house with the foaming pails of milk, Jack admitted shyly that he was kind of relieved that Rick had gone to work for them. On account of so many stage robberies taking place and maybe some rough ones who might come drifting around to bother Jinny while he was away at school.

"What did you hear about these stage robberies, Jack?" asked Rick Linton casually.

"I hear the other kids talking about 'em at school," explained the boy.

"They're the stages that come down from the mines at Tower Springs and Bald Mountain to the railroad at Fremont. I asked the teacher, Miss Samuels, about it and she said it was getting so bad the stage company couldn't get shotgun guards to ride the stages any more.

"These here robbers had killed three or four messengers. They'd ought to turn Sam Geddes and Bo Reeder and the rest of the Cloverleaf boys after them there stage robbers. They'd sure make 'em hard to catch."

Four trains a day went through Signal Butte, three passengers and one freight. All were through trains, the passengers never stopping except on order to pick up or drop an occasional fare.

Now and then the freight, low on water, would stop at the water tower for a refill. And when there was a shipping herd to go out, it would drop off a string of cattle cars on the siding and pick them up the next day. Rick Linton, Jinny Carr, and the youngsters were at supper when the evening passenger went through, leaving behind the smell of steam and coal smoke and the fading bay of its whistle as it fled on eastward.

Looking across the table at Jinny Carr, Rick noted the pensive, almost wistful look on her face as she listened to the dying echo of the train. And so, a little later, when Jack and Pudge had gone into the living room with their schoolbooks, Rick paused for a moment in the kitchen door and asked:

"How long since you've had a day off, Miss Carr?"

Stacking the supper dishes, Jinny Carr was startled. "Why—why, not since Dad's death, I guess."

"You should. Do you good. You could catch the morning passenger, be in Fremont in an hour, have a whole day around stores and people and come back on the evening passenger."

She seemed dazed but fascinated by the idea. This had been a lonely world for her. "But the station business," she protested. "The key. I couldn't leave that. What would—"

"I could take care of all that. I can even run a key. Little rusty, maybe, but I can still read and send. And how much station business is there? I'll bet there's days and days when there ain't a lick of real station business to take care of. Somebody has to be here, of course, just in case. I could do that for you."

"But you're not bonded. And the company—"

"Do I look like a thief? And do you think I'd let you down?"

There was nothing hangdog about his glance or manner now. His eyes were very level and cool. The girl flushed slightly as she met them.

"No," she admitted, "you don't look like a thief. And I wouldn't have given you the job if I didn't think I could trust you."

Rick's smile was quick and warm. "Well, then, you think over that suggestion I just gave you. You need a day off. Everybody does. Good night!"

There was a little lean-to shed at the rear of the station house, with an old bunk in it. Rick had restuffed the tick with dry, sweet-smelling wild hay and Jinny Carr had supplied him with a couple of blankets. Rick lolled on these, smoking, until he grew sleepy. Then he turned in for the night.

FOR the better part of a week things moved along at Signal Butte in quiet monotony. Rick Linton kept busy enough, what with nearly rebuilding the entire spread of corrals and keeping the water tank pumped full, which, when the wind did not blow enough, had to be done by hand. He marveled that Jinny Carr and young Jack had been able to take care of this latter chore, which was a heavy one. Every time he looked at Jinny, it was with deepening respect and guarded admiration.

By this time the newness of his presence had worn off and the two children accepted him fully. Even shy little Pudge confided deep and breathless childish secrets to him. Then one morning after the children had ridden away to school, Jinny called him into the station office, cut the outside circuits of the key and began rattling the key deftly.

"Read this," she challenged.

"I am glad you asked for that job," read Rick.

Jinny flushed and said, "Let's see you send something."

Rick took the key and tapped out, "I am glad you gave me the job. You and Pudge and Jack are swell people."

She laughed, flushed again, and said, "Thank you. I'm going to take you up on that offer, Rick. I'm going to Fremont tomorrow. It is something I've wanted to do for months. Both Jack and Pudge have to have some new clothes and I need a lot of things myself. I'll wire a stop order for Sixty-seven in the morning. And you'll have to run things here for the whole day. I'll be back in the evening on Twenty-nine."

Rick grinned and said, "Swell!" He thumbed a ten-dollar gold piece from a pocket, dropped it in her wondering palm. "I need another shirt. I'm down to my last one and if another hobo should rip this one up on me, I'd be plumb out of luck. With what is left you buy yourself the best meal in town and bring the kids a few extra trinkets. I think Pudge would like some gum drops. She told me last night that when she became a great, rich lady, she was going to have a barrel of them."

The next morning Sixty-seven slowed just long enough at Signal Butte for Jinny Carr, dressed in her best and looking mighty pretty, to swing aboard and wave back to Rick and Pudge and Jack as the train sped away. Pudge was inclined to be tearful, but Jack comforted her.

"Shucks! Jinny's only gone for the day. She'll be back tonight and we'll have supper ready for her. Come on, Pudge, or we'll be late to school. Take care of things, Rick."

"Sure," grinned Rick. "Sure I will."

Rick waited only until the youngsters, comfortably astride Suzie, the fat old mare, had jogged away into the sage, before going into the station office and getting down to work. He got out Jinny's carefully kept files of telegraphic messages sent and received and pored over them with thought-knitted brow.

He took a small notebook from a pocket and compared a number of dates in it with those of different messages in the files. Certain messages he read over and over again and abruptly picked up a trail that seemed to please him. For his eyes took on a gleam and he began whistling softly between his teeth.

After a while he got to work composing a message of his own. He laid it out on a piece of scratch paper, making a number of corrections before the result finally satisfied him. He opened the key circuits and called Caspar. When Caspar acknowledged he sent the message, repeated it for accuracy. He burned the piece of scratch paper, crumpled the ashes to dust in his palm. After which he pocketed his little notebook, put Jinny Carr's files back exactly as he had found them, and started to leave the station house to go on with his outside chores. He stopped at the sound of hoofs coming up outside.

IT WAS Bo Reeder. For a moment Rick's eyes sharpened and gleamed, but as Bo Reeder came in, spurs clashing, the old slouch and hangdog look was upon Rick again. Bo Reeder stared, let out his breath in a hard, explosive exclamation.

"You! What are you doing here?"

"Miss Jinny, she gave me that job, after all."

Bo Reeder looked around, his black eyes hard and angry. "Where is Jinny Carr?"

"Went up to Fremont on the morning passenger. Aims to spend the day, gettin' herself and the kids some new clothes. She'll be back tonight on Twenty-nine. I'm looking after things until she gets back."

"How about that?" Bo Reeder pointed to the key.

"Oh, I can take and send, after a fashion. Fooled around with a key some, when I was a kid. Miss Jinny hadn't had a day off since her pa was killed."

Bo Reeder's black eyes bored at Rick. "I told you the other day to get out and keep going."

Rick shuffled his feet uneasily. "I know," he admitted humbly. "But I sure

needed this job, so I came back and showed Miss Jinny I could sure work, fixing the corral and such. So she gave me the job, after all."

"Well, you're quitting it," growled Bo Reeder. "When Jinny gets back tonight, you tell her that. If you're around here after tomorrow morning, I, Bo Reeder, will make it my personal chore to break every bone in your damn, cowardly carcass. You hear me?"

Rick nodded, but argued weakly. "All I ask is to have my job and be let alone."

"You got your warning, Mister," rapped Bo Reeder harshly. "You're leaving these parts tomorrow morning—for good. Or else!"

The key began to click. "What's it say?" demanded Reeder.

Rick listened. "Crespi calling Signal Butte."

"Get it!"

Rick sat down, acknowledged, pulled the blank pad to him and began to write. Bo Reeder watched his every move.

"It's for Sam Geddes," said Rick.

"Get it—and shut up!"

Rick got it. It was merely a list of livestock market quotations. There was a pause and Rick thought the message finished. Then two final words tapped out: "Cutters steady."

Rick bowed his head a trifle lower as he wrote this, hiding the quick gleam which leaped into his eyes. But his feelings were completely masked as he came over and handed the message through the wicket to Bo Reeder.

"Sam Geddes sure is one smart cowman," he said humbly. "Keeps himself right up to snuff on the market, doesn't he?"

Bo Reeder glanced over the message, tucked it away in a pocket. He built a cigarette, paused in the doorway, blue smoke curling over a half-snarling upper lip. "You've had your orders. Tomorrow morning you drift, and stay gone. Understand?"

Rick nodded miserably. "If I got to I guess I got to," he mumbled. "I don't want any trouble."

He stood at a window, watching Bo Reeder ride away into the sage. A hard grin stretched Rick's lips. "You're closer to the end of your rope than you dream, Mister Bo Reeder," he murmured. "I hope things break so I get the chance to give a firsthand demonstration as to who is yellow and who isn't. Been pretty tough to take the pushing around I have, but that time is about over with."

III

RICK went back to the key, called Division Headquarters at Caspar again, rapped out several crisp messages. He smoked away a quarter of an hour before an answer came. With that taken and acknowledged Rick went outside to his chores and now his soft whistling was bright and full, his head up, his step lithe and quick.

That afternoon Jack and Pudge got home from school a trifle earlier than usual and Suzie, the fat old mare, had worked up quite a sweat.

"Kept Suzie gimping right along," explained Jack. "Want to get the cows milked, the chores done up, and supper all ready when Jinny gets home."

"A swell idea," applauded Rick.

And so it was, when Twenty-nine came rumbling in, whistling the stop, Jinny Carr, tired but happy, dropped off, her arms full of bundles, with still more to be handed down by a grinning conductor.

Supper was a happy meal, full of eager anticipation, as they listened to Jinny tell about her holiday in Fremont. After supper was finished and the dishes washed up, packages were piled on the table and opened, with Pudge and Jack in a childish frenzy of delight over things brought for them.

Rick Linton watched Jinny Carr with gravely sober eyes. He had a tough chore ahead of him this night and he hated the thought of it. But it had to be done.

The kids trooped off to bed finally, arms full of treasures. Jinny Carr leaned back and looked at Rick with tired but shining eyes.

"What a day!" she exclaimed. "I never stopped once. But it was wonderful. I

feel like a new person. And it is all thanks to you, Rick. How did things go?"

Rick had the old hangdog look about him again. "Bo Reeder was here. And another of those market reports came through for Sam Geddes. Bo Reeder was pretty cross at seeing me here."

"Yes. But you mustn't let that bother you. It is none of his business."

"He aims to make it so. He gave me until tomorrow morning to get plumb out of this country. Or else!"

"But—you're not going?"

Rick twisted his hands, shuffled his feet. "Reckon I am," he mumbled. "I don't want trouble with any man. I'm pulling out tonight. In the morning you can tell the kids good-by for me."

"Rick! I don't believe it!"

It was the hardest thing Rick Linton ever faced, to look this slim girl in the eye and maintain the part he had to play. "He said I had to git, so I'm going."

He saw the hurt, the disappointment fill her eyes, and there was a faint shimmer of tears, also. "B-but the children—they've grown so fond of you—" Her voice choked in her throat.

"I just can't take the chance of being all busted up," said Rick, forcing his tone to a thin, pettish shrillness. "And that's what Bo Reeder told me would happen to me if I didn't git. So I'm going."

Jinny Carr was quiet for a long moment. Then she said, her tone low and cool and incredibly distant, "Of course. I understand. Though I did think after that affair with that hobo, that maybe you were a man, after all. I—I was wrong."

She jumped up and hurried out of the room.

THAT night around midnight, a special train rumbled past Signal Butte. It awakened Jinny Carr from an uneasy sleep and left her wondering.

Several miles out along the tracks from Signal Butte, Rick Linton glimpsed the first gleam of the headlight of the special, so squatted down and touched a match to the little pile of dry sagebrush twigs he had heaped between the rails. The twigs crackled up into a tiny pyramid of flame. The special rumbled up, slowing. Rick stamped out the little fire, ran along beside the caboose, swung aboard. The special picked up speed again.

At Crespi, Bob Lowe the station agent woke up as the special ground to a stop. He got a light going, pulled on his shoes and overalls and hurried into the office, carrying the lamp. He was a fat, sweaty-looking man with little eyes, beaded between rolls of flesh.

Three men came into the office. Rick Linton was in the lead. "What's the special for?" Lowe blurted. "What's the idea?"

"This!" said Rick Linton, pushing the muzzle of a .45 against Lowe's fat stomach. "Haven't time to go into details just now, Lowe—but be assured you'll hear plenty of them before you start sitting it out behind bars. A little matter of phony market reports on livestock, sent to Sam Geddes of Round Valley. And the robbing of stages from the mines at Tower Springs and Bald Mountain along the roads to Fremont. Things like that."

Bob Lowe began to shake, his fat stomach quivering under the muzzle of Rick Linton's gun.

Rick said curtly, "Put the 'cuffs on him, boys. He's all yours."

Lowe collapsed into a handy chair. Handcuffs clicked.

"I think he'll talk, boys," said Rick. "The main thing for you to do is find out the identity of the go-between who got word to this fat crook from the mines as to when the treasure stages were due to roll. Work on that. I'll see you later."

Rick went out alone, climbed into the caboose and the special rolled once more. Two hours before dawn it stopped just short of a cut through some low hills, which here mounded dark above the sage plain. Three cars had made up this special, two box cars and a caboose.

Men swarmed from the caboose, opened the doors of the box cars. Gangways were run sloping down from boxcar doors to the ground and saddled horses were led over them. Five minutes later, at the head of eight other men,

Rick Linton was spurring into the black distance, following that backbone of low hills, which gradually mounded higher and higher toward where a black barrier of real mountains lifted against the stars to the north. The special train began a leisurely run back to Crespi.

Gray, frigid dawn found Rick and his men shivering in a high pass in those black mountains. They had topped one range, and now another faced them, across a deep, narrow canyon, filled with black shadow and morning mists. That canyon wound away and away, down to the south and east, running for miles and miles before finally opening into the sage plains twelve miles north of Fremont.

Down the full length of this canyon ran the narrow road, over which rolled the freight wagons and stages that connected the railroad at Fremont with the mines at Tower Springs and Bald Mountain at the far higher end of the canyon.

Rick and the men of his posse had dismounted in the lee of a jack pine thicket, which offered some protection to men and horses from the icy morning wind, whipping through the pass. But as the morning grew brighter and the sky in the east began to glow, Rick left the others and with a pair of field glasses taken from his saddlebags, climbed out onto a towering rocky point and settled down to a careful search of every foot of country he could bring under the reach of the glasses.

FOR the first time the needle of worry was beginning to dig at him. Had he overplayed his hand? Had he staked too much on his belief that he had worked out the proper answer from Jinny Carr's telegraphic message files at Signal Butte? Had he been wise to collar Bob Lowe, the Crespi station agent, first of all? One comfort was there. Guilt had stood out all over Lowe, and he was the kind who could be made to talk.

The sun came up, lancing golden light along the canyon. The stage would be leaving the mines any moment now. A treasure stage this trip, or just another Concord, rolling with passengers? Rick stirred restlessly, probing and searching, particularly along the lower reaches of the canyon to the east and south.

Here were dozens of side gulches running down from this ridge into the canyon. And in any one of them—

Rick stiffened, brought the glasses back to a spot they had just swept past. Movement there? He waited, breathless.

A low exhale of satisfaction seeped from his lips. Men, mounted men, dropping swiftly down that side gulch, disappearing into a heavy thicket of laurel brush at its lower end. Visible beyond was a short stretch of the stage road.

Rick hurried back to his men. "It's a go," he announced tersely. "They're down there. Come on!"

They went on foot, clinging to the shelter of brush clumps, of sweeps of timber, of jack pine thickets. Rick had counted the side gulches from his lookout point. The fifth one over was the one he wanted. They reached the head of it and Rick pointed to the fresh hoof marks leading into it. He tolled off two men to cut around below and two to cut around above.

"Block the road, upcanyon and down," he ordered. "They got their horses and once they get past us they'll be gone for good. If they try and go up the far side of the canyon we'll be looking straight across at the backs of their necks and have them dead to rights. If they try and come back up this gulch, well—" He shrugged.

With four men at his heels, armed and ready, Rick worked a slow and cautious way down the gulch. This thing needed fine timing. While the stage was rolling down from the mines and close enough to hold the full attention of the bandits, yet not close enough for them to open up on the shotgun guards.

These, Rick knew, were reckless, ruthless, dangerous men down in that laurel thicket. Men who had killed before and would kill again if given cause and opportunity. He could afford no slip-ups.

One of the posse caught Rick's arm and pointed. From this spot a glimpse of winding upcanyon roadway was in sight. And along it, behind a team of six, rolled the Concord stagecoach, swaying and bobbing on its leather thoroughbraces. In sight on it besides the driver, Rick counted three other men, two facing forward, one facing the rear. This then, was a treasure stage indeed, with three shotgun guards riding it.

Rick waved his men on down the gulch. The stage was still a good quarter of a mile above the mouth of the gulch and the deadly laurel thicket. Here was a twist in the gulch and Rick went ahead alone, cautiously working his way through the bend. At the outer bulge of it, screening himself behind a tongue of scrub brush, Rick found himself looking right down on the laurel thicket. And horses, grouped at the edge of the thicket under the care of one man, were hidden from the stage road, but not from above.

Rick brought his men around to the bulge of the bend.

"When I start, lace that thicket with lead," he told them softly. "They'll break for their horses, if I know riders. Then we'll have them in the open. Get ready!"

Rick pushed his own rifle ahead. Behind and beside him he heard gun locks snick. And now he was listening for the stage. The rise of the far bank hid any part of the road from view and this had to be judgment by ear. And if those three shotgun guards were to live, his judgment had to be right.

He picked up the clatter of hoofs, the squeal of brake blocks as the stage whip kept things under control on some sharp down pitch. A cold but electrifying current ran up the back of Rick's neck. Inside him a voice said, "Now!"

Rick could have dropped the horse guard easily, for the fellow was still and looming fair through the sights. But it wasn't in him to kill an unsuspecting man, regardless of cause. Rick let his rifle sights drift up to cover the very center of the laurel thicket and pulled the trigger.

IV

THE crashing report of Rick's rifle laced all the canyon with hard, brittle echoes. Swift on the heels of it the four rifles grouped around Rick ripped their blasting fury across the startled world. Lead chopped and slashed through the laurel thicket.

Crouched down there, a man who had just drawn an old flour sack, with eye slits cut in it, over his head, whirled to face up the gulch as Rick's bullet whipped by above his head. The next instant another bullet thocked solidly home, squarely between those eye slits, and the bandit died in his tracks, never knowing what hit him.

The laurel thicket waved and whipped as startled, desperate men dashed through it, most of them coming out the upper side, to gain their horses. One, hooded like the one who had first died, in his startled confusion leaped out of the lower edge, squarely into the stage road, not fifty yards in front of the on-rolling stage.

Brake blocks and locked wheels squealed and scraped and the team of six reared as the whip leaned back on his reins with a startled curse. Beside him a quick-witted shotgun guard went into deadly action. The gun across his knees leaped to his shoulder and blasted its full, round bellow of report. The bandit in the road, caught full in the hail of lashing buckshot, reeled, then went down like a twig before a high wind as a second load of buckshot smashed him squarely.

The gulch just above the laurel thicket was a mad tangle of terrified, plunging horses and darting, lunging riders, trying to get into their saddles. The horse guard was up first and spurring his lunging mount straight at the steep gulchside. The horse went up it in straining, grunting leaps, rider flailing away blindly with a chopping six-shooter.

A man beside Rick sighed softly and melted down in a still heap and the horse guard, all unknowing had put another notch on his gun. For that, every posse gun was turned on the horse guard

and they caught him in clear silhouette as his straining horse reached the top of the gulch wall. The horse went on, but its rider stayed, smashed down by three rifle bullets.

Brief as this action was, it gave the rest of the bandits a chance to catch horses and mount. Then they, too, set their frantic mounts at the gulchsides. All except one, who spun his horse, crashed through the laurel thicket and out into the road below. Instantly he had his mount at a full, wild gallop downcanyon, whipping about a bend below before the shotgun guards on the stage could get loose a shot.

But this way was not open, either. Two waiting possemen rose from behind a great, gray boulder, shouted a challenge to halt. Instead, the rider whipped out a gun and began to shoot. He got off three harmless shots before the rifles of the possemen crashed simultaneously. And though the horse fled on and on down the canyon road, the saddle it carried was empty.

One rider got out of the gulch and across the low ridge to the east. Ramming fresh cartridges into the loading gate of his Winchester, Rick Linton scrambled up and over this same ridge and met the rider almost face to face as the latter headed his straining mount back toward the main southern bulk of the mountains.

A gun flared in Rick's eyes and he felt the breath of the bullet beside his throat. He shot back, his rifle half lifted, threw himself to one side just in time to keep from being run down by the maddened horse. There was the sodden thud of something falling and the horse, now without guidance, crashed into a brush thicket, tangled loose and dragging reins there and came to a trampling, floundering halt.

Rick got up, levered a fresh cartridge into the chamber and went over to the huddled figure that lay at the edge of the brush. Like the others, there was that hooding flour sack covering face and head. But there was no mistaking that squat, barrel torso, the short, thick-thighed legs. Rick knew what he would find even before he pulled off the hood. The lifeless face of Sam Geddes looked up at him.

Rick went back across the ridge into the original gulch of death. The shooting had stopped. Rick's possemen were swarming in, stripping hoods from still and twisted figures, adding up the tally of identification.

One of the possemen turned to Rick and said, "You called the turn from start to finish, Rick. You got something ahead of you for working out this answer. The Cloverleaf outfit, from top to bottom."

Rick did not answer. He was suddenly very, very weary.

RICK LINTON came quietly down on the Signal Butte station house from the west. From far out in the sage he had, with his field glasses, identified the horse that stood beside the station platform. So, as he left his own horse and circled quietly in on foot to the station door, he knew whom he would find beyond it.

It was almost exactly like the first day he had come up to Signal Butte. There was Jinny Carr on one side of the wicket and there was Bo Reeder, talking to her from the other side. Both turned to stare, as Rick, grim-jawed and flinty-eyed, stepped in.

Jinny Carr went white and she cried softly, "Rick!"

Bo Reeder did not say a word. He just stared at the muzzle of the .45 with which Rick covered him.

Rick said curtly, "Hoist them, Reeder! I mean that. Get 'em up—high!"

Bo Reeder licked his lips, his black eyes veiling. His hands went up, slowly, even with his ears. Then he leaped, slashing one hand down at Rick's gun, snapping out his own gun with the other.

Rick could have easily shot him dead. But he did not. He pulled his gun back away from Reeder's frantic clutch and clipped Reeder under the ear with the heavy barrel, not too hard, but hard enough to knock Reeder sprawling. Before Reeder could recover, Rick had

grabbed the gun from his fingers, tossed it aside.

"Now," said Rick harshly, as Reeder staggered to his feet, "now we'll see about this yellow coyote business you've been mouthing so heavily. Ever since I found you weren't in the tally we ran up in High Line Canyon this morning, I've been looking forward to this. Today it was your turn to just ride around the country casual-like, to make yourself seen, so folks would think that the Cloverleaf outfit was about regular, ordinary business, instead of being out after another treasure stage.

"This was lucky for you, for you'll live a little longer until the authorities get around to hanging you. For the rest are dead, Reeder. Sam Geddes, the punk kid, Lefty—all of them. Get your hands up. I'm taking my bite before the authorities take all that is left!"

While he listened to Rick's bitter, biting words, the shock of the first knockdown was fading from Bo Reeder's eyes, leaving them inky dark, flat and bleak and deadly desperate. He dived at Rick, coming in low and fast.

Rick met him solidly and they wrestled there for a moment. Reeder smashed a wicked knee at Rick's stomach and Rick twisted to catch the driving knee on his hip. He spun Reeder around, broke his hold, drove one fist to Reeder's body, the other to his jaw, shaking him up. Reeder gave back, set himself suddenly and threw a crushing right to Rick's head. Rick ducked, but not far enough, and Reeder's hammering fist caught him glancingly.

The shock ran all through Rick, setting him back on his heels, partly dazing him. Reeder followed up, both fists winging. One blow cut a gash high up on Rick's right cheekbone, another brought blood seeping from the corner of his mouth. Rick crouched, weaved, let two more blows slide by, one over his shoulder, the other over the top of his head, which would have half scalped him, had it landed. And from the crouch Rick lifted one almost from the floor, getting the full lift of his half-bent knees behind the punch, plus every ounce of power in both of his driving shoulders.

Rick's fist landed squarely under the arch of Reeder's ribs and Rick could feel the instinctive set of Reeder's stomach muscles give and go flabby, breaking down under the terrific force of the punch. It seemed to Rick that his fist sank in wrist deep.

A breathy, blubbering groan broke from Reeder's lips. He staggered back, loose and shambling, head rolling, arms pawing aimlessly and weak. Rick, straightening up, caught him going away with a winging left and then a right and Reeder went down in a loose, helpless heap. Rick stood for a moment, scrubbing the back of a hand across his bleeding lips. Then he pulled a pair of handcuffs from a hip pocket, stepped over, pulled Reeder's wrists together, snicked the handcuffs in place.

Rick turned, looked at the white-faced, big-eyed, quivering-lipped Jinny Carr and managed a lopsided grin. "Your man of all work has come back, Jinny."

LATER Rick Linton lay on the couch in the little living room out back, while Jinny Carr put wet compresses on his battered face. "It was those phony market reports Lowe sent in from Crespi that finally gave me the real tip-off," Rick explained.

"I went over your files while you were away for the day at Fremont. Most of the reports were ordinary enough, just listing current livestock prices. But I finally noticed that a certain number of them ended up with these two words! 'Cutters steady.' And when I compared the dates of the messages containing those words, with the dates of past holdups, they were only twenty-four hours apart."

"You—you don't think I knew anything of what was going on, do you?" half whimpered Jinny.

Rick laughed softly. "Of course not, little goose. But those reports were vital to Sam Geddes. That's why he had been so generous with you, giving you the milk cows and old Suzie for the kids to ride back and forth to school. And while you were at Fremont, Bo Reeder came

over just in time to get another report coming through from Lowe at Crespi.

"That message ended up with those same two words: 'Cutters steady.' So I knew another holdup was in the offing. I wired this to the boss at Division Headquarters and he sent through a special train with horses and a posse of men. With those men I caught Sam Geddes and his Cloverleaf gang cold in the act, over in High Line Canyon. It was a real clean-up. From now on the treasure stages will roll in peace and safety."

"You let me be a gullible fool through it all," accused Jinny. "Why didn't you let me know that first day what you were after? You could have known I'd have helped you. You didn't have to sneak through my files."

"I wasn't sure of anything then except one thing," Rick defended. "Which was that Sam Geddes and his Round Valley crew were as tough and ruthless a bunch as ever rode an outlaw trail. I couldn't bring you into it in the slightest way which could have, if a slip-up occurred, brought Sam Geddes' vengeance down on you and Jack and Pudge. So I played the part of a spineless, scared drifter.

"I got a job first at the Cloverleaf, to see if I could pick up any line on things there. I learned one thing, which was that the whole outfit was as ruthless and deadly as they come. Most important, I learned about those market reports from Crespi. So I ran that trail down and it led me to the jackpot."

"Bob Lowe, the agent at Crespi?" asked Jinny. "What about him?"

"In custody. A fat, spineless, go-between crook. He'll talk, all right. And that will lead us to some other crook up at the mines who was getting word to Lowe when another rich treasure stage was to leave the mines for Fremont. And Lowe, with his fake market reports, got the word through to Sam Geddes."

"How about—him?" Jinny nodded her brown head toward the other office, where Bo Reeder, wrists handcuffed and ankles bound with a pigging string, lay glowering and poisonous and helpless, waiting the next train through that would take him and Rick Linton to Division Headquarters at Caspar. And justice.

"The authorities," said Rick grimly, "will be remembering shotgun guards who were shot off treasure stages with no more mercy than if they'd been stray rabbits. Their answer will be a noosed rope, is my guess."

Jinny shivered. Rick trapped one of her slim hands in both of his. "Let's talk of more pleasant things, Jinny. I'll be busy for a couple of weeks. Mainly in working over things at Cloverleaf headquarters, trying to locate Geddes' loot from past holdups. But the job is closing out now. I'll be back not as a shiftless, coyote-spined drifter, whining for a job, but as Rick Linton, Wells, Fargo operative. I'm wondering—how would you like to live at Fremont, steady?"

"Just—just what are you driving at, anyhow, Rick Linton?" She would not meet his eyes.

"Well, for one thing it would be a lot easier for Pudge and Jack to go to school. You wouldn't have corrals to fix, a water tank to keep full, and everlasting loneliness to fight. As Mrs. Rick Linton you could—"

"Rick! Do you realize what you are saying?"

"Sure I do. Jinny, girl—look at me."

She did, finally, and there was no mistaking the soft, glowing answer in her eyes.

Rick reached for her. "Fremont, here we come!"

That ride to Wrango and meeting up with a pretty range girl changed everything for rustler Lin Starbuck. And he found himself siding the law instead of dodging it when all of his longrider pards opined that it was the . . .

Owlhooters' Night to Howl

By Wilson L. Covert

THE hillside brush popped and two riders emerged from opposite points, checking rein on the slope overlooking Wild River Valley. Total strangers, they exchanged a curt "Howdy," then a rhythmic, clacking sound down the valley caught their attention. A horse-drawn mowing machine was cutting a wide swath in the waving blue-joint a half mile from the hill. Two overalled figures were wielding pitchforks, and the range was dotted with haycocks from an earlier mowing. Off to the southeast were a low-roofed house and pole corral.

The elder of the riders, about forty, with a long, thin face and drooping brown mustache, cracked his quirt against leather-cased leg, causing his horse to sidestep nervously. "Wouldn't you know it! Some dang sodbuster's got here ahead of me. Cuttin' up that rich pasture grass and my ga'nted cows just over the east rim, waitin' to graze on it. Where there's one of them farmers, you'll usually find a score or more."

The other rider, a bony-featured, lanky young man in battered Stetson and levis, his trouser-legs rolled halfway up boots with big-roweled spurs, answered, "Looks like a hay ranch, not a plowman's outfit. Did you say you were fetchin' cows?"

The older man nodded, giving him closer attention. Both wore the marks of a long saddle drill. "Cowman yourself?"

"Yeh." There was a slight pause while the young man's agate eyes regarded the questioner keenly. "Lin Starbuck. Learnin' that Wild River Valley was the last bit of free range in the country, I trailed my homeless Hogleg herd—better'n five hundred head—as far as the west rim, struck out alone to locate me a ranch site."

The older cowman looked annoyed. "Funny the two of us, not knowin' each other, should head for this place at the same time. I'm Ike Alvord. Got sheeped out over on the Bitter Water. Three thousand cattle need a lot of pasture, and that's what my Circle A's tallied before we hit the road. Between sodbusters and another cowman, I don't know where we'll come out."

Lin Starbuck didn't answer immediately. He had more reason than Alvord for not desiring close neighbors. Those cattle on the west rim had been picked up in small bunches as he fled from the region that had become too hot to hold him. Running-irons, with which he and his men were expert, had altered the mixed bands into the Hogleg that he planned to operate in Wild River Valley.

Starbuck lifted his reins. "No reason two cow outfits can't make a go of it here, Alvord, providin' the sodbusters ain't too numerous. You can do what you like, but I'm goin' back to my herd, drive it across the rim to grass. By that time it'll be dark and I'll ride down to the hay ranch, find out just how much land's been taken up."

Alvord turned his horse. "Not a bad plan. I'll see you there."

They hit the brush again, east and west, to rejoin their waiting outfits. Starbuck's men were not pleased at the news he brought. After supper at the chuck wagon, with the Hogleg cattle grazing under close guard, Lin headed back for the hay ranch. With him went Oil Ganther, a swarthy two-gun man whose itching trigger fingers were a source of worriment to Starbuck at times.

AS THEY were swinging down at the log-and-frame house, Ike Alvord loped in from the east. Starbuck greeted him, turned to the door. An overalled figure was framed therein, and Lin was surprised to note the shoulder-length hair. He hadn't supposed that one of those ranch hands observed from the hillside was a girl. She asked a little anxiously:

"Who is it?"

Starbuck moved forward, hat in hand, to introduce himself, Ganther and Alvord crowding his heels. "We'd like to see your father, miss."

She seemed to hesitate, then faced about to lead the way. As he stepped through the doorway, Lin saw an oldish man and a younger one at the back of the room, hastily tucking guns out of sight. The oldster shuffled to meet the visitors, his alert glance shifting from face to face. Alvord impatiently broke the silence.

"We're cowmen lookin' for grazin' land. How many sodbusters besides you are clutterin' up the valley?"

"I'm the only settler here," replied the old man. "Sell hay to the feed-barn man at Wrango, who supplies the cowmen over east of the valley. It's my busy season, with winter comin' on. I'm Zack Harney. My daughter, Joyce, and Ash Frisbie help with the hayin'." His grizzled brows furrowed. "Aimin' to settle, are you? I don't know as there's room—"

Ike Alvord, studying the craggy, sunburned face, suddenly burst out, "Ain't I seen you somewhere, Harney? I got a memory for faces."

The hay rancher said slowly, "I don't reckon so. Lived around these parts quite some time. Now, about your runnin' cattle here—"

"We ain't askin' your permission!" Alvord interrupted. "What're you but a squatter? If you think you can put us out, get the sheriff."

Harney shook his head. "I want no truck with sheriffs."

"Why not?" Alvord's eyes narrowed. "Badge-toters after you?"

"No," said Harney. "They don't bother me, I don't bother them. If you're de-

termined to throw down, I guess I can't prevent it. But your cattle will be roamin' the valley, eatin' grass that I could sell."

Starbuck, while listening to the conversation, had been stealing glances at the girl. Joyce Harney was pretty, even in faded and patched overalls, but she looked uneasy. Perhaps she was afraid the sharp give-and-take between her father and Alvord would result in a fight. But Lin wasn't quite satisfied with that explanation, especially when he noted the watchfulness of Ash Frisbie, the ranch hand, in the background.

Alvord's truculence irked Starbuck. He said, "We won't let our stock range your grass, Harney. Set your boundaries, and Alvord and me will respect 'em. One of us will take the north side of the valley, the other the south side. How's the water? That's important."

"It's as plentiful one side as the other," answered the hay rancher. "Lot of little creeks branch off from the river." He sighed. "It'll leave me in the middle, and I figured I wouldn't be crowded when I settled out here. But I can't do nothin' about it."

"You bet you can't," said Alvord. "And I'm dead sure I've seen you before. I'll remember where sometime." He turned and went out.

Starbuck, after reassuring the hay rancher they hadn't come to make trouble, retired with Oll Ganther stalking grimly at his side. It bothered Lin that the girl's anxious look remained when she said good night.

Alvord was waiting astride his horse. He said in a low voice, "That old codger is scared of lawmen for some reason. It might be a good idea to put a bug in the sheriff's ear, first time one of us rides to Wrango. With him out of the way, we'd have the whole valley to ourselves."

Lin, sharing Harney's reluctance to have any dealings with lawmen, replied, "Let him alone, Alvord. It's natural he'd resent newcomers when he's had the run of the place. And the sheriff must know he's here, because he goes to town to sell his hay. I'll ride over to your camp tomorrow and we can decide where each of us is goin' to settle."

Starbuck and Ganther parted from Alvord at the brushy hill. As the Circle A owner clattered off, Oll broke his silence. "We'll play it smart, Lin, if we wipe out that snorter and his men before they ever show up in Wrango. Then we can take over their big herd and boss the roost."

Starbuck faced him quickly. "We'll be smarter to run a straight outfit for a while, Oll. Me, I'm fed up with dodgin' the law."

"Maybe the rest of us don't feel that way, Lin."

Starbuck knew he spoke the truth. They were a reckless lot, those brandburners. He said, "While I'm boss, I'll give the orders."

"Yeh, while you're boss," said Ganther significantly. "What changed you all of a sudden? That girl? I saw you lookin' at her like a sick calf. If her old man's hidin' out from the law, she oughtn't to mind your bein' a rustler."

WITHIN a few days, the Hogleg outfit had settled on the north side of the valley, the Circle A throwing down on the south side. As a temporary abode each had a dugout, excavated in a convenient hillside. Oll Ganther didn't reopen the subject of raiding the Circle A in Starbuck's presence, but one night, with two others of the gang supposed to be riding herd, he turned his horse's head southward.

As Ganther explained to his companions, this was just a scouting trip to ascertain if the Circle A stuff was well guarded. They found that it was. As they passed a bunch of Alvord's cattle, bedded near a creek, several horsemen spurred out of a willow copse with bared six-shooters.

"Lost your way?" barked Ike Alvord's voice.

If he hadn't been covered by four guns, Oll would have filled his hands. "Why, no, pardner. Just dropped around to see how you were makin' out."

"Come in the daytime, if you're that interested," said Alvord. "And the head-

quarters dugout is over yonder. Good night, gents."

Taking the hint, Ganther and his men rode back up the trail. They hadn't gone far before a rifle cracked somewhere along the creek. Forty-fives banged a swift answer. Ganther said:

"For a second I thought they were takin' a long shot at us. Wonder what it means? Anyway, we found out Alvord's cattle won't be easy to rustle."

The shooting died out as they rode onward. Ganther's companions left him to join the Hogleg nightherders. He kept on to the dugout, turning his horse into the corral. Starbuck and some of the gang were playing poker by the light of an oil lamp. Ganther sat in the game. About an hour later, the pounding of hoofs made them lay down their cards. Ganther reached for the lamp and extinguished it. There were no windows, a cowhide served for a door, but the front wall of the dugout was loopholed.

"You been up to somethin', Oll?" Lin gritted in the dark.

Before Ganther could reply, the horsemen roared up to the door and Ike Alvord bellowed, "If you're to home, Starbuck, come out here!"

"Don't do it!" whispered Ganther, striding toward a loophole, guns in hand. But Lin pushed aside the cowhide and faced the visitors.

"Some of your outfit was wolfin' round my cattle tonight, Starbuck," said Alvord. "I ordered 'em off the range, but one sneaked back with a rifle and tried to bump us off."

"First I knew of it," said Lin. "Sure they were my men?"

"Sure. One was that Ganther. Maybe you fellows are on the rustle. You didn't seem anxious to inform the sheriff about Harney. Could be you're scary of the law yourself."

"Think what you please, Alvord. I'll see to it none of my outfit bother you again."

Alvord said, "I'm still tellin' the sheriff when I see him." He wrenched his horse about, his men wheeling in unison. As they galloped off, Starbuck felt Ganther's shoulder brush him as he came through the doorway. He seized Oll's shirt front and pinned him to the wall, growling:

"So you disobeyed orders! Tried to lift his cattle, then took a shot at him!"

"I'll admit a few of us rambled down that way, not meanin' no harm. But I didn't have my saddle gun out of the sheath. Heard shots as we were ridin' away. Let go me, Lin!" Ganther ended with a snarl.

Starbuck pulled him away from the wall, sent him staggering with a violent shove, so that Ganther lost his balance and fell. "I don't know how much to believe, Oll, but next time you go against orders I'm cuttin' you out of the herd!"

He watched Ganther's hands as the latter got up, cursing in a low voice. But Oll didn't go for the guns he had holstered, and Lin turned to the men watching silently from the dugout doorway. "Light up, boys, and get the saddles. It's time we were relievin' the men on guard."

PRESENTLY Starbuck rode away with three of the men to take over nightherding for the next two hours. The cattle were bedded not far from the dugout. Riding his beat on the south side of the herd, Starbuck was singing an interminable range song when the whang of a rifle cut him short. He felt the wind of the bullet, aimed a little high. He had seen the weapon's flash. The rifleman was hidden in a brush clump, about a hundred yards southeast. Lin crumpled in the saddle, rolled to the ground. On hands and knees he crawled through the tall grass.

He heard someone moving in the brush clump as he got within a few feet of it. Rising, gun in hand, he hurled himself forward. He collided violently with a dim form, which went over backward, uttering a little cry. About to poke his gun in the bushwhacker's face, Lin, amazed, jerked back his right hand, thrust out the left to help the other up. He scooped up the Winchester that had fallen to the ground and said:

"Now, why in the world would you be shootin' at me, Joyce Harney?"

Joyce stammered, "I—I wasn't shooting at you, Lin Starbuck."

"At what, then—bats, owls? You came

pretty close. Were you, by any chance, down at Alvord's ranch a little earlier, tossin' lead around?" Joyce didn't answer, just stood trembling, and he handed her the rifle. At the moment he could think of but one reason for the girl attempting his life—to protect her father from too curious neighbors. "If your old man has any reason to fear the law, Joyce, I'm the last fellow to get him in a jackpot."

"Thank you, Lin," she said. "I'm awful glad you weren't hurt."

The cattle were on their feet, bawling. Starbuck could hear his men riding hard and singing lustily to quiet them. "Your horse back in the brush?" he asked the girl. "Better ride, then, before the boys come over. See you at the ranch sometime."

"Any time, Lin," said Joyce, and disappeared in the brush.

Starbuck now had no doubt that Zack Harney was a fugitive from the law. Apparently there was no criminal charge against him in this cattle district, since the local lawman let him carry on his haying business without interference. But if Ike Alvord dropped a hint to the sheriff, investigation of his past record might prove disastrous to Harney. It was certain that Alvord intended making trouble for the Hogleg outfit the first time he visited Wrango. He'd make it a point to go there soon, perhaps the next day, for the man was a rangehog, eager to be rid of the Starbuck and Harney outfits. Lin, as he mounted and joined his men in quieting the cattle, cursed Oll Ganther for giving Alvord a chance to strike them in a vulnerable spot.

By morning, Starbuck had a plan to prevent Alvord from stirring up the sheriff, at least temporarily. Despite his resentment toward Ganther, he picked the gunslick as one of the men to ride with him, for Oll was a deadly fighter if trouble developed. They headed east for the trail worn by Harney's hay wagons in trips to and from Wrango, dismounted at the roadside and loosened saddle girths. There might be a long or a short wait before Alvord came along, but Starbuck intended camping at that spot a week if necessary.

"Easiest way to settle it is to bushwhack 'em," said Ganther, as he lolled in the grass, smoking. "Say we do keep Alvord from talkin' this time, he'll try to contact the sheriff later. We can't spend our time watchin' for him every trip he makes to town."

"And it's all your fault, Oll!" Starbuck fixed him with a steely eye. "But we're not ambushin' Ike. The future will have to take care of itself."

THE day passed uneventfully and they ate some of the food they had brought with them. But shortly after nightfall hoofbeats sounded on the valley trail westward. Starbuck and his men were in the saddle, jogging east, before shadowy horsemen showed up behind them. It proved to be Alvord and four of his cowhands. The Circle A boss was far from pleased to learn that Starbuck's party was going in the same direction.

If Alvord and his men hoped to shake the Hogleg riders after reaching Wrango, they were disappointed. Both parties swung down at the same saloon, and Lin cheerfully ordered the first round of drinks. Then Alvord ordered one. Wiping his mouth, he said, "Well, see you later, Starbuck. C'mon, boys." But as the Circle A men moved toward the door, Lin and his rustlers trailed along. Alvord said angrily:

"Why're you stickin' so close to us, Starbuck?"

"Figured we could see the sights together," Starbuck grinned. "It's our first trip to town, too."

"Maybe we don't hanker for your company," growled Alvord.

Lin knew he was itching to get to the sheriff. "Is that friendly?" said Lin. "We're neighbors, and neighbors ought to stick together."

The Circle A boss hesitated to start a fight. Starbuck and his men looked able to handle their end of a gun battle. Ganther, in fact, had the earmarks of a killer. Alvord, jerking his head at his punchers, stamped back to the bar, to

imbibe more whisky and think it over. The Hogleg rustlers lined up with them.

Suddenly Alvord's face brightened as he leaned on the mahogany. Gazing into the back-bar mirror, Starbuck saw what had caused his change of expression. Two men had entered the saloon, one wearing a sheriff's star. Alvord turned and called, "Hey, sheriff!"

"Be careful what you say, Ike!" Lin purred in his ear.

The lawman and his companion joined the group. Introductions followed, Alvord stating that he and Starbuck had taken up ranch sites in the valley. The sheriff's name was Hocking. The man with him was Wingate, the feed-barn owner.

"I hope Harney cut enough winter hay before you fellows moved in on him," said Wingate. "It's near time for his wagons to roll in."

"Happen to know where Harney come from?" Alvord asked suddenly.

"I don't," said Sheriff Hocking. "Do you, Wingate?"

The feed-barn boss scratched his head. "Seems to me he mentioned the Tumbleweed country one time. I—"

Alvord struck the bar with his fist. "Now I remember—" He didn't finish, for Starbuck covertly dug him in the ribs.

"Remember what?" Hocking asked, gazing at the open-mouthed Alvord.

"That he forgot to shut the corral gate," said Lin smoothly. "His remount broncs will get out." He clamped a hard hand on Alvord's shoulder. "But they won't wander far, Ike."

Sheriff Hocking looked puzzled. So did Wingate. They wished the new cattlemen luck and moved down the bar. Shortly afterward they left the saloon. Starbuck spoke to Alvord.

"If you've seen enough of the town, let's go home."

Ike's only answer was an oath. He and his men marched out to the hitchrack with the Starbuck gang. As he was mounting, Lin observed Alvord slide out of his saddle and dart toward the sidewalk, yanking his gun. Starbuck's right hand whipped down and up. Alvord jerked as a bullet struck his upraised arm, dropped his .45. Lin was at his side before he could pick it up, grating:

"Thought you'd make a break for the sheriff at the last minute, eh? Back in the saddle, Ike!"

RUNNING feet sounded up the half-lighted street. As Alvord was climbing into the saddle, favoring his injured gun-arm, Sheriff Hocking loomed out of the shadows, demanding, "What was that shootin'?"

Starbuck, at Alvord's stirrup, said, "One of the boys feelin' his likker. Won't be any more powder burnin'."

The sheriff stood and watched them ride off, strong doubt in his mind. Starbuck and his men stuck with Alvord's party clear to the Circle A dugout ranch. As they filed in through the hide-hung doorway, a couple of Alvord's cowboys rose from blankets on the earthen floor. Lin offered to dress Ike's arm. The latter gruffly refused.

"I'm tryin' to avoid trouble, Ike—" began Starbuck.

"You're a cow thief!" snarled Alvord. "That's why you wouldn't let me talk to the sheriff. And Zack Harney's a murderer. I was up in the Tumbleweed country several years ago when he killed a sheriff. He's still a wanted man. First chance I get, Hocking will know about you both!"

"I see you're bound to be troublesome, Ike," said Lin. "I don't want to shoot you, but I've got to keep your mouth shut somehow." He noticed Ganther watching Alvord with bleak eyes. "I'm leavin' Ganther here to keep tab on you. If you try to inform on us or Harney, he's to stop you. Otherwise, he's to let you alone. That clear, Oll?"

"Plenty," said Ganther, with a hard grin. "It's a job I'll like."

Sheriff Hocking couldn't down the notion that there was something crooked about one of those new outfits in Wild River Valley. Alvord had seemed to be under restraint of some kind. It preyed on Hocking's mind until he saddled up, late the next afternoon. Arriving at the Circle A dugout on the edge of night, he

found Alvord alone. Never was a visitor more welcome. Ike eagerly unbosomed himself. He didn't know that Ganther, gliding up outside, stood with his ear at the cowhide covering the door opening.

Oll Ganther had long coveted leadership of the Starbuck longriders, felt that Lin was too squeamish about killing. If he, Ganther, was bossing the gang, they'd clean out the Alvord and Harney ranches and run the valley. As he listened to the sheriff and Alvord plan to round up the Hogleg bunch, Oll made up his mind. Lin would quit the valley before he'd fight the sheriff. Why not get rid of Lin, bring the gang to the Circle A, expunge that outfit and the sheriff at the same time? It would look afterward as though Hocking and the Circle A men had shot it out, leaving the Hogleg bunch in the clear. Alvord and the sheriff were drinking as they talked. There should be time enough for Ganther to get his rustler pals. He slipped around the dugout toward the corral.

Had Ganther waited a bit longer he would have learned something to his advantage. Sheriff Hocking was leaving shortly to organize a posse at Wrango. He told Alvord to have his cowhands ready to join them. On the way back to town, he intended placing Harney under arrest. But Ganther, ignorant of the fact that Hocking would be long gone when he returned with the gang, raced his horse all the way to the Hogleg. He got down at the dugout, pulled aside the cowhide with his left hand, the right palming a gunstock. Lin Starbuck turned about in the lamplit, earth-walled room.

"What brought you, Oll?" he asked; then he saw the killer look on Ganther's face, the gun in his hand.

Lin stabbed for his shooting-iron, leaped sideways as Oll's Colt flamed. But the bullet reached Lin. He folded and lay still. Ganther, blowing the smoke from his gun-barrel, let the cowhide fall back in place.

Starbuck didn't hear the horses pounding southward, twenty minutes later. It was a full hour before he raised himself on his hands and bitterly recalled Ganther's treachery. His head wound wasn't so serious but that he could move about. Knotting a bandanna around it, he left the dugout cautiously, his Colt bared. But there was no need of caution. None of the gang was in the vicinity.

Rigging his mount, Lin rode out to the herd. Not a herder was on duty with the cattle. It didn't take Starbuck long to figure that Ganther, always keen to play the leader, had seized the reins at last. Probably his first move as head man would be the destruction of the rival cow outfit.

LIN pointed his horse down the trail to the Circle A. The door of the headquarters dugout was a gaping black aperture, with the cowhide torn away, when he arrived. Two or three forms lay sprawled in front of the dugout. A groan caused Lin to drop swiftly out of the saddle. He lit a match and gazed into the pain-twisted face of one of his waddies. From the dying owlhooter, Starbuck learned that the gang, led by Ganther, had finished off the Circle A outfit and Sheriff Hocking, started for Wrango to celebrate and establish an alibi.

Lin sat by the man until he died. Then he remounted, spurred along the eastward trail. Grim purpose kept him upright in the saddle. Far to the north he observed the glowing windows of the hay ranch. He wondered that Ganther hadn't visited Harney, also, made a clean sweep in one night. Perhaps he'd better warn Joyce and her father that the wild bunch was on the rampage, in the event that he missed them in Wrango.

There were two loaded hay wagons in the Harney yard. As Starbuck was riding past them, houseward, voices struck on his ears. He pulled up abruptly. Ganther couldn't have checked on the men slain at the Circle A dugout if he believed the sheriff had been killed, for Hocking's voice reached Starbuck clearly.

"Sorry your old man put up a fight and I had to drill him, Miss Joyce. He gave himself away the minute I mentioned sheriff-killin'. I'll go after that Starbuck gang soon as I can gather a posse. No reason why you and your hired

man can't keep the business goin'. All the cattlemen east of the valley need hay for the winter. Suppose you and Frisbie go along with me to Wrango, drivin' them loaded wagons in the yard. Wingate's anxious to get stocked up."

Joyce's tearful voice answered, "All right, sheriff. Dad was afraid to drive in after Alvord said he'd seen him somewhere."

Starbuck's horse gave an inopportune snort. The sheriff said in an alert tone, "That wasn't my bronc! Sounded like it was around the side of the house."

Boots crunched on gravel. Sliding from his horse, Lin whacked it with his hat and stepped up on the hind wheel of the nearest hay wagon. He was snugly buried in the hay when Hocking slammed around the house and fired at the vanishing horse. The lawman went back, muttering something about "spyin' rustler." Starbuck lay quietly. He had unfinished business at Wrango, whether he faced the sheriff afterward or not.

It seemed a long time before Frisbie, the Harney ranch hand, came to hook up teams to the wagons. Joyce mounted to the seat of the vehicle in which Lin lay hidden and the wheels began to turn. He could hear the sheriff riding alongside as the wagons rolled out for Wrango.

When the muffled sounds of the town's night life reached Starbuck, he clawed aside the hay that covered him. Somewhere a gun or two boomed and men shouted hilariously. The sheriff said to Joyce, "Somebody gettin' gay at the Shorthorn Bar, maybe wreckin' the place. I'll see you later." He was off at a swinging lope.

STARBUCK guessed those carousing men were his rustler pals. He balanced himself upright and said: "Here's where I get off, Joyce!"

Surprise nearly toppled her from the wagon seat. She pulled up as he was swinging over the side, telling her he hadn't time to explain. He hit the sidewalk. The yelling at the Shorthorn Bar had died. But the shooting broke out again, fast and furious this time, not like drunks in a playful mood. Starbuck launched into a run, drawing his Colt. He saw the sheriff's booted legs sticking over the door sill of the saloon, gunsmoke curling in the yellow patches of light. A hated voice pitched up:

"What's one sheriff, more or less! This is our night to howl!"

Lin slowed his pace. He crept to the door, laid a hand on the right half of the batwings. In the smoky barroom, Ganther and the others occupied the center of the floor. Oll seized the arm of a dance-hall girl, who was staring at the lawman sprawled in the doorway. "Let's dance!" he bawled, pulling the unwilling girl around. His glance strayed over her shoulder and suddenly he released her, unleathering his gun. "Wait a minute, sister! That badge-toter moved!"

Starbuck sprang inside, between Hocking and Ganther, as the latter was throwing down. Oll tripped his hammer, but Lin's gun belched flame in the same instant. Driving lead nearly floored Starbuck. His bullet had rocked Ganther back on his heels. Lin squatted on his spurs, flaming lead bursting from his gun muzzle. Oll took a few jerky steps and crumpled. The others were centering fire on their one-time leader. He traded bullet for bullet, slugging the last man back against the bar, where he fell slowly.

They carried Sheriff Hocking out, but Starbuck, leaning weakly against the wall, hand pressed to his side, heard someone say the lawman wouldn't die. Then he felt two arms around him and was looking into Joyce Harney's pale face. She said, "I'll help you to the doctor." And nobody tried to stop them when she led Starbuck out.

As they left the doctor's office, he was torn between two desires: to linger with the bereaved girl, or to ride to freedom while there was yet time. She seemed to sense his indecision.

"One of my wagon team is saddle-broken, Lin. You can ride him bareback, with just a halter. But before you go I want to tell you something. It can't hurt Dad now. He was the one who shot at you that night you were riding herd. Fearing Alvord would remember where they had met previously, bring up that

murder, and because he thought you'd both ruin his hay business, Dad planned to embroil the two outfits by killing a man on each side. Knowing what was in his mind, I followed and overtook him on your range. I grabbed the rifle before he could shoot again. You just missed seeing him when you rushed the thicket and bowled me over."

"I thought you were tryin' to protect the old man," said Lin. "He kept out of the hands of the law a long time, but it finally covered him. If I run now, it'll corner me sometime, too. I'd never see you again."

"Would that matter so much, Lin?"

Before Starbuck could answer, a deputy sheriff came briskly along the sidewalk. "Been lookin' for you, Starbuck . . . don't touch your gun! Hocking wants you in his office."

Joyce slipped a hand through Lin's arm. "I'll go with you."

The bandaged sheriff sat straighter in his rawhide-bottomed chair as the three entered the jail office. "How come you weren't with your gang in the Shorthorn Bar, Starbuck?" he asked abruptly.

Lin told him. News of the slaughter at Alvord's ranch brought a surprised look to Hocking's face.

"So your pals were celebratin', thinkin' they'd wiped me out, too? They would've made a better job of it, there in the saloon, if you hadn't taken cards, Starbuck. I'm grateful for that. All the cattle in your herd are rustled stuff, eh?"

"Yes," said Lin.

"Didn't steal any of 'em around here, though?"

"No," said Lin.

The sheriff shifted to an easier position. "Ain't any charge against you in my county, then. I'll have to take over the cattle, return 'em to the place they come from. But—" Hocking's eyes twinkled as they rested on the girl clinging to Lin's arm, "if you want honest work, maybe Joyce would hire you for the hay ranch. She'll need an extra hand, now."

"Oh, I will!" Joyce said warmly.

Hocking chuckled. "The way she looks at you, young fellow, you're luckier than you know."

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACTS OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AND MARCH 3, 1933
of Western Trails, published M-monthly at Springfield, Mass.
for October 1, 1946

State of New York } ss.
County of New York }

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared A. A. Wyn, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Publisher of the Western Trails, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor and business manager are: Publisher, A. A. Wyn, 67 West 44th Street, New York 18, N. Y.; Editor, A. A. Wyn, 67 West 44th Street, New York 18, N. Y.; Managing Editor, None; Business Manager, A. A. Wyn, 67 West 44th Street, New York 18, N. Y.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also, immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one per cent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member must be given.) Magazine Publishers, Inc., 67 West 44th Street, New York 18, N. Y., A. A. Wyn, 67 West 44th Street, New York 18, N. Y., C. A. Publishing Co., Mt. Morris, Ill., E. Campbell, Mt. Morris, Ill., E. L. Angel, Rockville Centre, New York, N. Y.

3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages or other securities are: (If there are none, so state.) None.

4. That the two paragraphs, next above giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company, but also in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner, and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the twelve months preceding the date shown above is (This information is required from daily publications only.)

A. A. Wyn
(Signature of publisher)

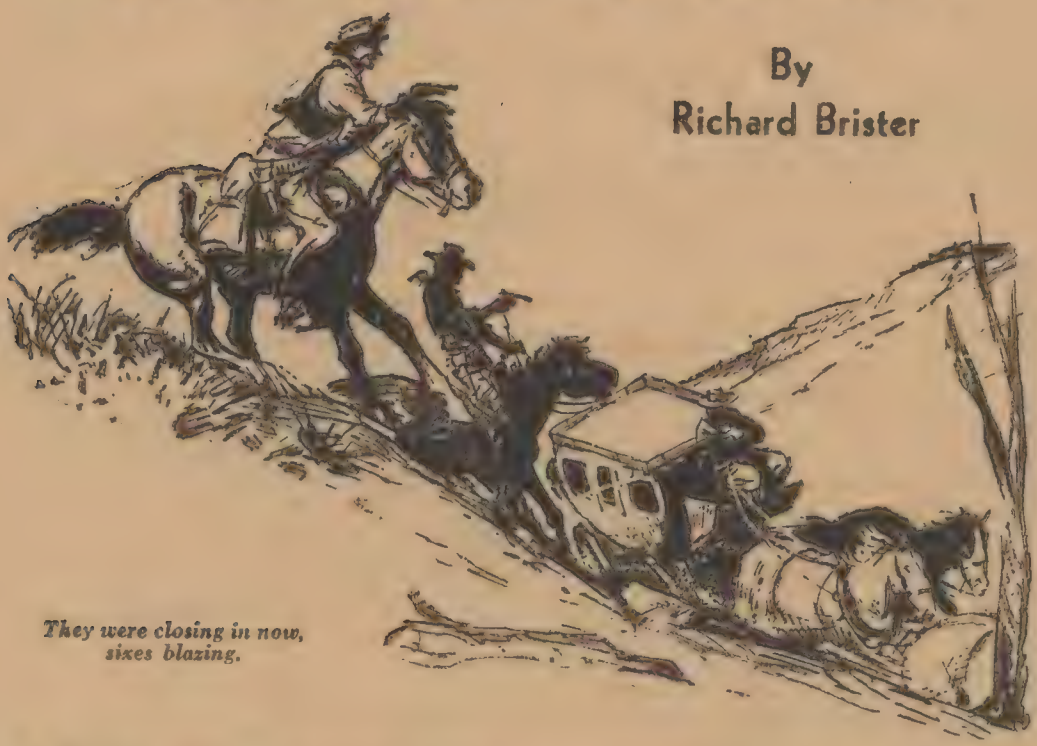
Sworn to and subscribed before me this 1st day of October, 1946.

ROSE BLUMENTHAL, Notary Public
New York Co. Clk's No. 435, Reg. No. 975-B-7
Commission expires March 30, 1947.

Jingle Jarrett, fed up with stagecoach driving and ducking badmen's bullets, promised to tote the bullion once more. And this time he drew Satan as a passenger on a . . .

Death Ride to Denver

By
Richard Brister



They were closing in now, sixes blazing.

JINGLE JARRETT poured another stiff drink from the Old Crow bottle on the bar before him. He set the bottle down and turned his lank, stooped-over frame toward the messenger from the Gold Gap stage office. An unhealthy flush mottled his lean, lantern-jawed face, and his gray eyes blinked blearily as he snapped out a question.

"Todd wants to see *me*? What in tarnation for?"

The messenger shrugged. "Dunno, Jingle. Why not come along over to the stage office and ask him?"

Jingle scowled briefly down at the bar rail. "If the Old Man wants to see me," he muttered, "he knows dang well where he can find me. I ain't drivin' none of his rattletrap stages no more, and you can tell him for me that I'm through kowtowin' to him."

The messenger frowned briefly, then nodded and walked out through the batwings. Jingle poured himself a fresh drink and grinned, trying to picture Todd's face when he received that message. If he knew the steel-hard, hot-tempered old ramrod of the Gold Gap stage line at all, Todd would probably bust a blood vessel, then come looking for him.

Todd did. Two minutes hadn't passed before the batwings flew inward and the

stocky, florid-faced stage line owner came angrily across the sawdust floor toward him.

"Now, look here, Jarrett," he blustered loudly, "I've always treated you friendly and honest, and you've got no dang call to—"

"You look here," cut in Jingle bluntly, "I'm through drivin' your rattletrap stages through the Gap and makin' a settin'-duck target o' myself for every Tom, Dick 'n' Harry that takes it into his head to steal hisself a mess of gold ingots. I been shot at so much up there on the box that it don't feel natural without lead slugs fannin' past me. I'm finished, Todd. Find yourself another mule skinner."

GOLD GAP was a boom town, less than two years old. The mines were producing gold at a dizzying clip, and the local smelter was turning out ingots at the rate of twenty to thirty thousand dollars' worth every month.

Getting that small fortune in bullion out to the Treasury Department in Denver each month was the tough part. For a solid year Jingle Jarrett had driven Todd's stages down through Dead Man Gap past the iron gantlet thrown up by the notorious outlaw, El Bracito, and his ruthless band of road agents.

Luck had been with him for a longer time than any man had a right to expect. He had been shot through the arm once, and once through the shoulder, but he had not lost one precious cargo of bullion until two months back.

On that final run, during the wild chase through the Gap which had become routine to him, a wild shot from the bandits had caught him right through the chest. He had keeled over promptly, had plunged off the box and into a thick clump of mesquite by the roadbed. The messenger had been killed outright. El Bracito and his men had robbed the stage of its precious cargo in bullion and had ridden away hastily, not bothering to finish the job they had started on Jingle.

It wasn't until five hours later that a searching party brought Jingle back to Gold Gap on a litter. Little Doc Peasley patched him up, and he came around finally. But he had tasted the fringes of death. He had a great deal of time to think things over, while convalescing, and he had reached some conclusions.

"There ain't enough money in the United States mint," he told Todd levelly now, "to make me run another load of gold bullion through Dead Man Gap for you. If I wasn't tarnation lucky, I wouldn't be here right now, Todd, an' you blame well known it. I figger I've had all the luck I'm a-goin' to. Next time'll be curtains, the way I look at it. So—there ain't goin' to be any next time."

Todd looked pained. He sifted a pudgy red hand through his gray thatch of hair, biting his wide lips with annoyance. Jingle Jarrett couldn't help smiling. Todd's stage line profits leaned pretty heavily upon the fat fee he received each month for shipping out the smelter's output of bullion. The man needed Jingle's help now, needed it badly.

"Consarn your hide, Jingle, you know I've tried to get the stuff through without you, since you've been stove up. There just ain't another man stands a chance to get through Bracito's gantlet. I lost three good drivers and two messengers in the past two months, and not a one of them got through with a shipment. Now the insurance company's man's been into my office. Says they won't insure another load without I can get you back drivin'."

Jingle said harshly, "That ain't my worry, Todd."

"Dang it!" spluttered the stage owner. "Don't you see what's gonna happen? If I lose a load of bullion without no insurance, it'll bust me flat. I'll be out of business. And what's gonna happen to this town, without no stage line? What's gonna happen up at the smelter, if there ain't no way to get the gold out? You're killin' this town, Jingle, bein' so consarned stubborn. If we can git just a couple more loads through, till the government sends in them troops they promised, to wipe out El Bracito—"

Jingle bit his lip. "I still figure I've run my luck out, Todd. I'm through drivin' that suicide run for you."

Todd looked impatiently at him. "Wouldn't be runnin' a might shy on guts too, would you, Jingle?"

JINGLE reached out quickly and grasped the stout man by the shirt front. He brandished a knotted fist and said through clenched teeth, "If I was you, Todd, I'd take that question back, pronto."

"All right, all right," the stout man said limply. "I was just goading you, Jingle. I'm a desperate man, dang it!" He wiped beads of sweat from his glistening forehead. "If I was to pay you double—"

"I told you," cut in Jingle coldly, "there ain't enough money in the United States Mint—"

"Suppose," said Todd slowly, "you was to drive a stage through without any bullion. Would that suit your highness?"

"What's the idea?"

"As long as I have you back drivin'," said Todd patiently, "I can still get insurance. That's the only stipulation the insurance people made. They never mentioned you drivin' the bullion."

"You mean—they could be that foolish?" gasped Jingle.

"Come over to the office," nodded Todd, "and look at their letter. All it says is unless I hire you back, their contract is voided. So—" the stage owner grinned slyly—"if you was to take an empty decoy stage through the Gap today, while Rod Elsmore drove the real load around through Bent Willow—"

Jingle couldn't help smiling. It was a simple plan, but it just might work. And Jingle had felt guiltier than he let Todd realize, about letting this town down in refusing to go back to work. It was that guilty feeling, and a few prodding doubts about his own courage, which had driven him to heavy drinking here lately.

In his mind's eye he envisioned himself driving that empty stage through the Gap. When El Bracito and his gang came swooping down on him, this time, he wouldn't have to make a run for it. He could just pull in his horses and sit there on the box with his hands up. It was easy to surrender, knowing there was nothing to be lost in so doing.

The longer he considered the stage owner's plan, the better he liked it.

He suddenly squared his lean shoulders and straightened up at the bar there.

"By golly, Todd," he said, "this time, I think you've come up with something. I'd sure like to pull a slick one over on that El Bracito. By golly, I'll do it!"

"Fine, fine." Todd rubbed his fat hands. "Better put that bottle away now, Jingle. Be sobered up and ready to roll at two-thirty. I'll have number five harnessed and waiting." The fat man walked out, beaming broadly.

Jingle Jarrett walked out a minute later, having turned down a final drink on the house. It was good to walk the streets of his town once again, holding his head up, knowing there was important work to be done, and he the man who was going to do it.

As he swept past the false-fronted corner of the saloon, his eye flicked sidewise along the little alley that separated the saloon from Lem Samuels' Hardware. A skulking figure of a man moved down the alley and out of sight around the back of the building.

Jingle frowned. He didn't know the jasper, a short, chunky-legged hombre wearing a wide, high-crowned white Stetson. He wondered worriedly how long the stranger had stood there in the alley, and how much, if any, of the conversation with Todd had been overheard by the skulker.

He wondered more, at two-thirty that afternoon, when he arrived at the stage barn and found Todd, Doc Peasley, and a couple of idlers busily engaged in lifting a stretcher into the number five stage.

THERE was a man in the stretcher, his face showing white and peaked against the brown blankets wrapped around him, and the man had a familiar

look to Jingle, especially when he saw the high-crowned white Stetson resting atop the fellow's stomach as he lay under the blankets.

"What's all this?" Jingle asked sharply.

Sawed-off Doc Peasley turned to him with a curt nod. "This fellow was took down bad sick an hour ago, Jingle. He's got stabbin' pains in his chest, and cold flashes around the middle, and I'm double-doggoned if I know what to make of them symptoms. Ain't a reg'lar doc anyways. All I know is how to fix up gunshot wounds and sechlike. Figger you'd better take this pore feller along in to Denver, an' have a real sawbones take a gander at him."

Jingle scowled. "Jest where'd you hail from, stranger?"

The man under the blanket said in a weak voice, "Sloped in from Albuquerque last Monday. Been hopin' to go to work in the mines, but I ain't feelin' so chipper here lately."

"What were you doin' hangin' around in the alley between the saloon and Samuels' Hardware, this mornin'?"

"Wasn't hangin' around. I was just cuttin' through for a short cut to the boardin' house where I'm stayin'."

"Which one?" said Jingle sharply.

"Ma Smiley's," the man countered weakly. And then his eyes hardened. "I figger that'll be about enough questions, friend. If you don't want to haul me into the sawbones, just say so. I ain't—"

"All right," Jingle said wearily, and turned his back.

Todd grasped his elbow and led him aside. "This is luck for us, Jingle. If that dang Bracito hauls you up short and sees a sick man in the stage, he'll leave you go on through to Denver without no gun trouble. He's a devil for thievin' and killin', but he must have a human streak in him somewhere."

Jingle thought about that. It was true, what Todd said. If Bracito intercepted Jingle with an empty stage, and realized he'd been decoyed away from the real load of bullion, the man would be furious. But if it appeared that Jingle's whole purpose in making this trip was to get this sick man to a doctor—well, even El Bracito could understand that.

Jingle climbed onto the driver's seat and took his long blacksnake whip out of the holder. He clucked once or twice, gently, then cracked the whip over the ears of the leaders. The stage rolled down the main drag of Gold Gap and out of town in a cloud of dust.

Jingle drove carefully, avoiding ruts and bumps in the road. He took it slowly, making as gentle a ride as he could for his sick passenger. Sluicing down into Dead Man Gap, he put on more speed from long habit. His eyes narrowed and his breath came faster. He was waiting now for what he knew must come soon, the *ki-yippi-yi* howls of the masked El Bracito and his band of road agents, rushing down at him hellbent for election, their killer guns blazing.

"All right," a familiar voice said in a cold brittle inflection, "I reckon you kin rein in on them critters now, pardner."

Jingle turned on the box, his jaw slacking. The chunky stranger who had been loaded tenderly aboard the stage in Doc Peasley's stretcher, had his head and shoulder stuck out the stage window. He was standing up, hanging onto the door handle with one hand. A gaping six-gun muzzle threatened to blow a wide hole through Jingle as the stranger trained it on him with the other hand.

"Just what d'ya—"

"Rein in them broncs," snapped the stranger, and jabbed the six forward. "Or would you ruther have me make a sieve of you and check-rein 'em my ownself?"

"Well, now," said Jingle, "I ain't plumb locoed. Leastwise, not that much. What kind of a coyote play're you pullin', stranger?"

"If," snarled the stranger, "you're playin' for time, you're gunna overdo it. Rein in them hosses!" Again the gun jabbed emphatically forward, and as if to add even more emphasis to his order, the man added coldly, "El Bracito talkin'!"

EL BRACITO! Jingle felt his heart turn over sickly. So this was the famous masked bandit who had the whole countryside sick with fear of him! This pasty-faced, blocky-built little—a sickening thought came to Jingle. This man *had* overheard his consultation with Todd, back in the saloon this morning. El Bracito was onto their whole plan.

He had cleverly managed to get taken aboard the very stage which they had hoped would decoy him away from the pay load. When his men struck, then, as they soon would now, thought Jingle, El Bracito would hand them his news and lead them around to intercept young Rod Elsmore with the real pay load, at Bent Willow.

Jingle couldn't imagine why El Bracito hadn't simply sloped out alone to warn his men, unless he didn't know where exactly to locate them. He knew he'd locate them all right, if he came along with the stage, though, and in plenty of time.

One thing was sure, Jingle thought angrily. He had an old score to settle with this crafty sidewinder. He nodded, as if in compliance with El Bracito's order to rein in the horses. Instead, he pulled one set of reins only, swerving the leaders off to the side of the road.

The stage wheels on that side cracked solidly into a thick piece of sandstone. The stage rocked crazily on its steel springs, almost turned over. El Bracito was hurled bodily inside the window upon which he was leaning.

Jingle didn't know whether the bandit had dropped his gun in that sudden jolt, but he certainly hoped so. He curled his long writhing blacksnake over the leaders, and *ki-yippeed* wildly, scaring them into a runaway panic. He kept them pulled over onto the side of the trail, where the going was rough.

The old stage rocked back and forth, jolting, bouncing like crazy. Jingle clamped his legs around an upright under his seat and hung on grimly. From within the stage he could hear El Bracito cursing, roaring, and he could hear the man's flung body thumping the sides of the passenger compartment like rattling dice in a box.

Jingle kept his nags going, faster, faster, and gave those dice a good shaking. He heard a solid thump, and a loud groan behind him, and he leaned back, peeking down through the trap into the cabin.

El Bracito apparently had cracked his head on the metal framework of the cabin during those first wild moments of runaway riding, and had knocked himself unconscious. He lay sprawled grotesquely across the back cushions, a bloody red gash staining his white forehead.

Jingle chuckled with pleasure. If this wasn't luck, he never had seen it. Todd had practically talked him into capturing the one and only El Bracito. After this afternoon's work, the name of Jingle Jarrett would be forever famous among stage drivers.

He started to pull in his horses, meaning to tie El Bracito up for safe delivery to the marshal in Denver, when he heard the distant clatter of hoofbeats, and a strident medley of bloodthirsty voices.

It was what he had known must come, sooner or later. The outlaw riders of El Bracito.

This was an old, old story to Jingle. Also, it was an old story to the horses. Jingle knew the horses would run. He knew they would stay on the trail, and they would run hard and sure-footed, with or without his expert hands on the reins to guide them. He put his faith in his two big bay leaders, strong-legged beasts, intelligent and not spookers.

Jingle dropped the reins and picked up his old Sharps buffalo gun from its saddle under the box. He swiveled around on the seat and leveled it grimly at the first of the plunging outlaw riders who made a fair target.

Brang-g-g. The brittle thunder of the old gun made sweet music. The heavy piece bucked and squirmed like a captive squirrel in his hands, and the rider plunged, taking the slug in his belly.

Hot lead whistled over Jingle's head, fanning his wispy hair, and he thought

grimly, *All right, this is it, then. If they catch me this time, they'll kill me, sure. With their leader unconscious inside there.* . . . Another slug whined past, dangerously close. Jingle leveled the Sharps at another rider. Again he aimed for the stomach, and again he connected.

THERE were six in the band at the start. There were four now, plunging down the sloping banks recklessly toward him. Jingle had an advantage in a firmer foundation from which to fire. The bandits' horses were coming down hard on stiff forelegs, against the drop of the land.

Slugs whistled harmlessly past Jingle on either side, and still that old Sharps was singing its song of death.

Jingle knocked another bandit out of his saddle. Hot lead plowed into his side, just over the belt, and the sledging impact of the slug almost knocked him off his precarious perch up there on the box.

Jingle Jarrett swore and shook a clenched fist at the riders. They were closing in now, their sixes blazing in a quickening tempo. Jingle fell to his knees, clutching his side, from which blood oozed stickily. He pulled his Colt six-shooter from its holster and blazed twice at the first of the closing outlaws. He missed, and another slug ripped at his shoulder.

He felt himself sinking into unconsciousness swiftly. A flash of movement behind him, within the cabin, caught his eye. He turned in time to see El Bracito leaning shakily out of the stage window, pointing a six-gun at him with weak, wavering hands. The man looked dazed, but there was burning hatred behind his bleak eyes as he leveled the six. Before Jingle could swing his own gun around, El Bracito's six boomed.

The leaders swung into a sharp turn just at that moment, and the old stage rocked wildly. "Get that fool, El!" Bracito's riders were yelling hoarsely. But they wasted their breath. The twist in the trail threw El Bracito's aim off.

And Jingle, with the last strength left in him, leveled his gun and planted a slug between the outlaw chief's eyes.

He sat there, watching El Bracito's body sag down limply, draping itself like a rag doll upon the stage window.

That knocked the heart out of the last two outlaws. Abruptly they gave up the chase and stood watching the stage rattle along on out of the gap. As for Jingle Jarrett, he could feel a black cloud descending upon him. As unconsciousness came, he hoped the lead horses would keep going into Denver. . . .

Jingle Jarrett came to on a crude bunk in the marshal's office in Denver. When he opened his eyes, the marshal gave him a drink of whisky, then said:

"Mighty valuable cargo you brung in this trip, Jingle. Congratulations."

"You mean El Bracito?" said Jingle weakly, and he explained everything.

The marshal gaped at him. "You mean —that pasty-faced little hombre you brought in shot through his head was—"

"I've heard tell," said Jingle dryly, "El Bracito has a scar acrost the back of his neck, where a .45 slug once creased him. You might check on that."

"By gum, you're right," the marshal put in, when he returned later.

Jingle said, "Listen, marshal, how come, if you never knowed who that was out there in the stage, you tell me I brung in a valuable cargo? Wasn't nothing else in the stage that was worth a plugged nickel, to my way o' thinkin'."

"Wasn't there, now?" grinned the marshal. "Nothing but thirty thousand in gold bullion, hid under the back cushions in the compartment. 'Pears as if, Jingle, Old Man Todd tricked you into totin' a pay load without your realizin'—"

"Why, the connivin' son," started Jingle. Then he smiled. He'd draw double pay for toting this pay load. He had lost any nagging doubts he might have been entertaining about his own courage. He had disposed, once and for all, of the dreaded El Bracito, and in so doing, had earned himself a neat five-thousand-dollar bonus.

"Can't really say as I hate him too bad, though, marshal. Todd tricked me into a right profitable trick."

Powdersmoke Prophecy

By Walker A. Tompkins

After his gambler brother disappeared in frontier darkness, Del Rand rode up from Texas to find him. But when the only clue Del found was a gypsy mystery, the Texan learned that it would take powdersmoke magic to bring his brother to light.

DEL RAND located the fortune-teller's tent within minutes of alighting from the crowded Frontier Express at this hell-roaring U.P. camp at end-of-track. Men "lived hard and died easy" in Warbonnet, the seething boom town on the extreme tip of the spearhead which civilization was thrusting deep into the Indian-infested frontier.

The Texan realized his own quest might end in gunsmoke before this day was through. That depended on whether Madame Zira the gypsy knew the key to the riddle that had brought him on this manhunt trail from the Rio Grande country.

The darkly beautiful face of Madame Zira appeared to float in midair, inside the pitch-black tent. The glow of a tiny oil lamp, concealed under the tinseled velvet table, was refracted up through the crystal ball between the gypsy's cupped palms. It traced mysterious shadows across her features, glinting off the brass rings hanging from her ear lobes, making the paste ruby on her coronet sparkle like a real gem.

Across the table Del Rand waited, knuckles squeezed white on the carved teakwood arms of his chair.

"I see a tall stranger from the South," the Romany girl intoned in the sepulchral accents used by mystics communing with the occult. "Where the steel pushes to the sunset he stops for a day, seeking one of his own blood who is now dead. He brings death in his heart . . . the crystal grows dim . . ."

Del Rand's mouth tightened with annoyance The crystal ball's glow was ebbing, true enough. A shutter controlled by Madame Zira's slippered toe was probably responsible for that illusion. If her palm was crossed with silver—

Rand pushed back the teakwood chair, stretching a long right leg encased in a spurred cowboot, hitching his body around to get a hand in the pocket of his buckskin pants. He tossed a second silver dollar on the plush table. Madame Zira's crystal globe brightened perceptibly.

To a man less skeptical than Rand, there might have been magic in the seeress's words. True enough, he came from the South . . . the brasada country along the Rio Grande. The steel which pushed to the sunset was a poetic allusion to the Union Pacific's westering rails.

And he sought one of his own blood. But even a stranger like this priestess of the occult could not overlook his resemblance to the missing Dean Rand. There was only a year's difference in the ages of this Texas cowhand and the reckless young gambler who had linked his fortunes with the U.P., following it westward to meet the oncoming Central Pacific from California, a project destined to span an empire and link great oceans with steel.

Madame Zira's hooded eyes, black as jet, held the off-focus stare of a clairvoyant in a trance. Here in this draperyhung tent, festooned with huge paintings of human palms and craniums, oilcloth charts of the zodiac and astrological horoscopes, the mystery of the Orient put a spell on a man. Del Rand had to shake himself to fix his mind on a world of bitter reality.

"Listen, Madame Zira," Rand spoke up wearily. "This gypsy hocus-pocus is wasted on me. I know my brother Dean has been in Warbonnet, probably in this very tent. He was always a fool for fortunetellers — it's part of the superstitious makeup that goes into a gambling man. I'm told you're the only fortuneteller in camp. If you know anything about Dean or what happened to him, stop mooning over that hunk of glass and give it to me straight. I'll pay you well."

It was a long speech for the taciturn cowhand. But the gypsy girl did not appear to have heard. Her bejeweled hands curled about the polished quartz sphere and her scarlet lips moved as if seeking to frame words which stemmed from a source outside her mortal being.

"I see a hill . . . in the shape of a wolf's head," the girl whispered, sweat beads pearling her olive forehead from the intensity of her concentration. "I see yellow gold and black iron, crimson blood and white bones. . . ."

Madame Zira looked up, her eyes glowing like live coals behind ice.

"The stranger from the South will visit the hill shaped like a wolf's head . . . he will find what he seeks where the stars gleam deep in the earth . . ."

The glowing crystal ball went suddenly dark. The artful drapes masking the under side of the table could not prevent the Texan's nostrils from detecting the faint odor of kerosene smoke from an extinguished lampwick, blending with the perfumed incense which cloyed the atmosphere.

"My powers are spent, Del Rand," Madame Zira's whisper seemed to retreat in the darkness. "My prophecy is finished."

Rand leaped to his feet, his pulses hammering.

"*You know my name!*" he cried sharply. "My brother *has* been here—"

From the peaked roof of the darkened tent came a purr of ropes through a pulley, and sunlight flooded in through parting curtains behind the Texan. Ma-

dame Zira had vanished somewhere behind the thick drapes which partitioned off the seance room.

"You're afraid to talk!" Rand muttered, opening and closing his fists in baffled indecision. "Whoever killed my brother would kill you if you talked—"

He picked up his big Texas sombrero and stepped out into the crowded main street of Warbonnet, squinting in the harsh Wyoming sunlight.

A JARRING cacophony of noise dinned on his ears, snapping him back to reality. The puffing of a funnel-stacked U.P. switch engine over on a sidetrack where freshly hewn crossties were stacked like cordwood for hundreds of yards. The racket of hammers where carpenters were throwing up a frame saloon. The lurid profanity of a mule skinner trying to extricate a freight wagon piled with green buffalo hides from the deep mud.

The off-scourings of humanity had gravitated to this lawless camp at end-of-track. It was late afternoon, but still too early for the gangs of Irish track layers and graders to come back to town to buck the tiger and get drunk.

It was the hour when the dance hall girls promenaded in their bustled gowns and silken parasols, mingling with broadcloth-coated gamblers, and blanketed Indians, and the rough, bearded giants who hunted buffalo on the prairies to supply the railroaders with steaks.

Warbonnet was typical of the camps Dean Rand had followed, mushroom towns which flowered and withered with the westward march of steel. His brother had rubbed shoulders with these same blue-coated cavalry troopers and freighters and adventurers.

Dean's letters had reached Del Rand every week, routed to Texas by pony mail and cattle train and stagecoach. They had carried vivid descriptions of Sioux raids and hard-drinking plainsmen in coonskin caps and buckskins, outlaws and Irish paddies, and beaver-hatted capitalists from New York and St. Louis.

Then the letters had ceased coming. Del Rand had stuck it out a month before admitting to himself that his brother's last message had ended on a note of menace.

He carried the dog-eared onionskin letter with him in his calfhide vest. Its contents nagged his dreams and lived with him to this very day when he had alighted from the train that had carried him out from Nebraska, through Kearney and North Platte, Cheyenne and Laramie, and the lesser camps which, unlike Warbonnet, had taken permanent root in the wake of the transcontinental railroad. The letter had read:

> You know I've always said that women and cards don't mix. Yet a girl has persuaded me to wear her ring, a golden dragon that winds twice around my finger and that I'd give anything to own. She considers it as a sign of betrothal.
>
> And I might marry the girl, Del, for I'm as close to being in love as I ever expect to be. But it happens that she is earmarked by the boss gambler of Warbonnet as his private property.
>
> Last night he offered to stake a fortune in gold against that ring, cut of the cards, the loser to leave town. But you can't wager something which amounts to the pledge of a woman's heart.
>
> They're saying around the Red Front bar that I'm wearing my death sentence on my finger, that I had my chance to back water last night and refused it. That gambler doesn't know me very well, does he, Del?

Rand drifted with the flow of humanity along the indefinite street, scanning each tent and frame shack and tin-roofed soddy with a keenly discerning eye.

Elsewhere in Wyoming, Rand's cactus-scuffed chaps, low-slung Dragoon six-guns, and the red bandanna knotted loosely around his throat would have made him conspicuous. Cattlemen were yet to follow the vanguard of the U.P. trail into the buffalo and Indian country. But in the melting pot of Warbonnet, Del Rand was striking only because of his towering stature and loose, bowlegged gait.

He came to the Red Front Saloon finally, the only familiar name he could

link with any fragment of Dean's chatty letters. He had never been specific about names and places.

The Red Front was typical of end-of-track dives, tarpaper roofed, its walls bolted in sections for dismantling when it frog-hopped with the end-of-track settlements.

RAND shouldered through slatted batwing doors, sizing up the establishment which he had reason to believe was where Dean Rand had made his living across the gaming tables. A square gambler and a man willing to run a bluff for sky-high stakes, his brother Dean had never dealt from a stacked deck in his life.

The central portion of the Red Front was the barroom, earthen-floored and with a pine counter which advertised itself outside as the Longest Bar in the West. The brass rail was jammed with customers, even at this off-hour. Topping the murky backbar mirrors were oil paintings, elk heads, Sioux warbonnets, racked guns, buffalo hides, and Indian basketry.

To his right was the dance hall. Tinpanny music from a piano and fiddle sounded above the shuffle of clumsy dancers.

Rand turned his attention to the long gambling hall which opened off the left end of the bar. He moved in that direction, pausing in the wide double doorway to scan the smoke-clouded, high-raftered barn of a room.

Men were hunkered around circular tables, playing faro and stud and blackjack. Stacks of gold coin were everywhere. A chuck-a-luck cage was doing a heavy business. In a far corner a croupier droned from his high stool, beside a roulette wheel where the fickle ball of fortune clicked monotonously, bringing riches and ruin alike to the men grouped about the layout.

Remorse flooded the lean Texican as he pondered the vagaries of a man's soul, that would make him trade the heady, sage-scented air of Texas for a gambling hall such as this, foul with the mingled odors of human sweat and tobacco, cheap whisky and whale-oil lamps.

He sensed a pair of eyes leveled at him from a corner of the room nearest him. He turned to see a lone man dressed in the boiled shirt, string tie and fustian swallowtail of a professional gambler, idly shuffling a deck of cards at a poker table.

The gambler's slitted black eyes were like burned holes in his sallow face. They were sizing Rand up with an intensity which arrested the cowboy's attention.

The cardsharp stood up, towering to a height which forced him to cant his head to avoid hitting a lamp hanging from a roof joist. He dropped the cards on the baize and sauntered over to where Del Rand stood, a quizzical smile exposing gold-capped teeth under his curving mustache.

"Pardon me for staring at you so rudely, stranger," apologized the gambler with the suave urbanity of his kind. "For a moment I mistook you for someone I used to know."

The Texan reached in his shirt pocket for tobacco sack and thin husks, to conceal the rush of excitement which surged through his veins.

"Dean Rand, maybe?" he asked softly.

The gambler's face was inscrutable as he nodded. "The same. Dean used to run the faro bank here at the Red Front. You'll be his brother?"

"The same," quoted the Texan, smiling. "Delburn Rand. You say my brother used to work here?"

The gambler extended a fishbelly-white hand, the pressure of his tapering, prehensile fingers matching the rope-calloused grip of the cowboy.

"My name's Keyes Delivan. Yes, your brother was here up until two months or so ago, Rand. He made his pile and pulled out for Texas—or so he told us when he left."

SOMETHING sharp and metallic needled Rand's thumb as they released the handshake. As Keyes Delivan reached under his lapel to extract a cheroot from his flowered waistcoat. Rand saw that it was a ring.

Even in the murky lamplight of the Red Front gambling hall there was no mistaking the ring. It was made in the likeness of a dragon entwined about Delivan's finger. Some Asiatic goldsmith had fashioned that jeweled bauble, the duplicate of which would probably be found nowhere else on earth.

"I'm sorry to hear I missed Dean," Rand said, twisting and licking his quirly. "I came up from San Antone to look over the prospects of running some cattle up here close to the railroad. But you got too many Injuns on the prod up here, Delivan."

The gambler lifted a hand to signal a Chinese waiter heading for the barroom with a tray of beer mugs. "Some bourbon for my friend, Chee Fung," Delivan ordered.

Rand shook his head at the Chinese. "Thanks," he said, "but I do my drinkin' at night, mostly."

Delivan lighted his cheroot from Rand's sulphur match.

"You probably passed your brother en route," suggested the gambler, smoke forking from his scimitar-shaped nose. "A likable lad he was. Square as a section corner, and always ran a popular faro bank. You got in on today's train, I take it?"

Rand nodded. "Yes, I rode in on the iron horse. And I intend to ride it back to Omaha tonight. I haven't seen any scenery up here in Wyoming that makes me want to leave Texas."

A hard-eyed girl in sleek satin, overrouged and loaded down with cheap jewelry, entered from the barroom and caught Delivan's eye.

"If you'll excuse me, Rand," the gambler said with a slight bow. "We must have that drink later on. And if you care to try any of our games of chance, I trust you will find luck up here in Wyoming."

Rand leaned against the door casing to finish his smoke, as Delivan headed for the roulette table with the woman on his arm. She was the type, Rand appraised her, who would wear a heavy golden dragon finger ring. But that her artificial beauty could have won Dean's love seemed unthinkable.

A white-whiskered oldster was swamping up cigar butts and trash from the earthen floor. Rand touched his arm as the old man worked through the doorway.

"I'm a stranger in these parts, friend," the Texan drawled. "I'm looking for a hill that resembles a wolf's head. Any idea if I'd find such a landmark around Warbonnet?"

The swamper's rheumy eyes studied the cowboy's face for a moment before answering. "That would be Wolfhead Hill, sure," the swamper chuckled, with a humorous inflection that Rand failed to interpret. "It's where that gypsy girl who reads palms and suchlike, used to park her little wagon."

"Madame Zira, you mean?" Del Rand asked, trying to keep his voice casual.

"I thought you said you was a stranger in these parts," cackled the swamper. "Yeah, Zira pitched her little red tent up there between the twin peaks on Wolfhead Hill, before she moved down into the Silver Spike Hotel. But she ain't the friendly sort you're looking for, son. Plumb unsociable with men, Zira is."

Rand saw the reason for the swamper's dry mirth, now. Apparently Madame Zira's exotic charms were not shared with the men who found her attractive.

"Where's this hill located?" Rand asked.

The swamper jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "About half a mile north o' town as the crow flies. You'll see the rocks, shaped like a wolf's ears. But Madame Zira's wagon is behind the Silver Spike now, stranger. You'd have that long climb for nothin'."

RAND sauntered out of the Red Front and crossed the street, heading down an alley between a land speculator's office and a horse corral until he came to open ground flanking the railroad.

From here he had an unobstructed view across the flats to the rolling, sage-carpeted hills overlooking the town. His eyes were drawn to a lofty knoll which dominated the near horizon, topped by

a long ledge of rock ending in two conical peaks. From Warbonnet, the hill bore a marked resemblance to the sharp muzzle and pointed ears of a range wolf, sculped by nature in colossal granite.

A footpath snaked off past the temporary shops and water tanks of the Union Pacific yards and curved up the slope toward Wolfhead Hill. There was probably a shorter and easier road leading to the crest of the ridge, if Madame Zira had been able to park her wagon and pitch a tent on the summit.

But Del Rand headed in a beeline across the greasewood flats, inspired with the sense that he was nearing the end of a crusade, that he was treading ground where Dean Rand had walked not many weeks ago. Perhaps the sun-baked gumbo still held the impression of his brother's steps.

Sundown was flaming across the flat Wyoming horizon when Del Rand reached the summit of the ridge and stood between the steepled rocks which formed the "ears" of Wolfhead Hill. His spike-heeled cowboots had not been made for climbing. The cowboy's lungs heaved from the exertion of scaling a slope which was far steeper than it had appeared from town.

It was not hard to find where the nomadic Madame Zira had erected her tent, in the weeks before Warbonnet had attained its full stature as an end-of-track camp and offered hotel accommodations. Sledge-blunted tent pegs still outlined a rectangle at the base of one of the pyramidal rocks. The ashes of old campfires made a gray smudge on a smooth gypsum ledge.

Dusk was softening the harsh outlines of the noisy boom camp on the flats below, before Del Rand found what Madame Zira's enigmatic prophecy had prompted him to search for around the hilltop campsite.

Behind the wolf's ears was a thick growth of chaparral, interlaced with game trails. A hundred yards west of the camp, the ridge had been split in twain by some prehistoric convulsion of the earth, forming a deep fissure into the bedrock. The crevice was less than ten feet wide at the brink, but when Rand flipped a pebble into the shadowy chasm he estimated that it must be at least a hundred feet deep.

How had Madame Zira phrased her prophecy? *You will find what you seek where the stars gleam deep in the earth.*

Rand had come from Texas to solve the mystery of his brother's silence. He knew, with some primitive certainty which he could not define, that he would not give up his quest until he had explored the sinister depths of this narrow cleft.

He worked his way down the hillside toward the twinkling lights of the U.P. camp, until he came to the mouth of the rock-ribbed fissure. Light from a high-riding moon penetrated between the cliffs. He started clambering through the talus which littered the pit of the narrow crevice.

It was hard going, through shadow too deep for the moon's rays to penetrate. He figured he was midway into the heart of the ridge when he squirmed around a narrow twist in the fissure, to see moonlight illumining a little of white debris which at first he mistook for dead wood, fallen from the rimrock overhead.

Then he saw the human skull lying there, and the jumbled sticks resolved themselves into ribs and disarticulated vertebrae. A human skeleton, broken by a hundred-foot plunge from the ledge above.

PREDATORY animals had scented this open grave hidden from human eyes. With fang and claw they had scoured the bones clean. Tattered fragments of clothing lay about, and sturdy boots which could not be consumed by furred or feathered scavengers. His last doubt was nullified by the discovery of a weathered beaver hat, its leather band bearing the gold stamp of Dean's favorite haberdasher in San Antonio, Texas.

Alone in the gelid blackness, Del Rand gave vent to his grief in the silent, tearless agony which only a strong man could know or plumb. What tragic drama had transpired on the crest of Wolfhead Hill

those long weeks gone, Del Rand could only reconstruct in mind's eye from the testimony of these bleached bones and a few cogent phrases in the last letter Dean Rand was to pen this side of eternity.

A man who had always been captain of his soul, young Dean must have succumbed to the exotic lure of the enchantress who called herself Madame Zira. Dean had probably escorted the glamorous gypsy girl out from town on some dark and fateful night, seeing her safely to her lonely tent up here in the clean sweet air, away from the tawdry camp.

Rand believed he knew what had happened. A bullet from ambush, a girl's anguished cry, then a corpse dragged through the hilltop brush to be dumped into this awesome fissure in the earth.

A threat of sure and speedy death the penalty to seal Madame Zira's lips as to the deed she had witnessed. *Yellow gold and black iron, red blood and white bones.* The girl's memory painted a vivid scene which Rand could only imagine.

Reverently, Del Rand covered the desecrated bones with eroded earth to sanctify Dean's resting place. The Wyoming hills would be his monument. It was fitting for a man who had mixed women and cards in defiance of his own gambler's code, who had paid with his life for a love which Del Rand knew had been as sincere and honest as the brother he had known of old.

Then he started back through the inky depths of the defile, knowing that his path must lead him back to Madame Zira's tent in Warbonnet, for final confirmation of what he knew to be the truth. He must be positive of Keyes Delivan's guilt before he meted out retribution in a way which the lawless West could understand, the justice which lay in the Dragoon six-shooters at his thighs. He had never lifted those guns at a human target before.

Del Rand had reached the open hillside when the steely voice out of the night arrested him, caught waist-deep in the mouth of the rocky split, his hands gripping sagebrush clumps in the act of climbing out on the slope:

"I'm sorry the cards had to fall this way, Rand. But your brother must have written you more of his private affairs than I knew."

Rand jerked his head around. Keyes Delivan stood limned in silhouette against the lights of Warbonnet, a scant six feet away from the mouth of the defile.

A stubby-barreled .41 derringer was in the gambler's pale fist. Its black bore was leveled at the Texan's chest without a tremor. Moon rays glinted off the dragon ring on Delivan's finger.

A matter of a clock-tick of time lay between Rand and the doom behind Delivan's trigger. In that instant, the Texan cursed the impulse which had made him inquire the whereabouts of Wolfhead Hill from the swamper in Delivan's own saloon. The swamper's tip must have brought Delivan to this guilty ground to keep a vigil at the mouth of a mantrap.

Madame Zira, too, would feel the vengeance of this cold-eyed killer. Only she could have directed this stranger from Texas to Wolfhead Hill and its grisly secret, Rand wondered, in that desperate moment, if the gypsy's clairvoyant powers had told her of her own ill-starred fate.

"I'm sorry, Rand—"

The cowboy flung himself to his knees as Delivan pulled trigger. He had gambled on odds which Dean would have thought impossible, but the derringer ball ripped the egg of muscle on his left shoulder and ricocheted off into the defile.

A heavy Dragoon leaped from Del Rand's holster as he reared to his feet above the level of the ground, triggering a shot through the smudge of gunsmoke which obscured the gambler's face.

Delivan had dropped his single-shot sleeve gun and pawed a Colt from his armpit holster, in the incredibly short interval after sensing that his first bullet had missed.

The big six-gun spat flame, but Delivan was already dead on his feet and the slug went wide.

(Continued on page 60)

One-Man Posse

Exciting Cowtown Novelette

CHAPTER I

PERCHED on the buckboard, reins in hand, Jed Dobson's gray-haired widow smiled down at the lean and sinewy young man in range garb.

"I'll just about catch the eastbound train, Mr. Shelby, and I'm glad to be on my way. Couldn't stand the ranch after Jed died. But nobody wanted to pay my price till you came along. Keep an eye on them Herefords of yours. They'll be a temptation to the scalawags livin' hereabouts. Maybe it's a good thing you're a lawyer as well as a cowman. Ain't too much law in Broadaxe County. Well, good-by." She spoke to the team. "Giddap!"

"Good-by, Mrs. Dobson," said Gratton Shelby, lifting his wide-brimmed hat as the vehicle began to move. "I'll look out for the cattle. Pleasant journey!"

He watched her drive down the road toward the distant cowtown of Rosadero, then turned to survey the weathered ranch house. Back of it stood bunkhouse, wagon shed and corral. There weren't

on the Warpath

By J. Edward Leithead

Bullets smashed through the window.

Rancher Grat Shelby had to tote all his legal learning to the fore when he fogged into Rosadero. For a renegade sheriff was calling the turn. And only when Grat once again hung up his shingle and buckled on a six-gun could he cope with a lobo lawman and his holster hirelings.

many Dobson cows grazing the lush acres which extended almost to the adjoining county line, but Gratton Shelby had trailed in his own herd, three hundred-odd whitefaces.

Shelby considered that he had got a bargain, though Mrs. Dobson had spoken once or twice of neighbors who dragged hungry loops. A little rustling was nothing new in Gratton's experience. He'd take care of it when it happened, through law channels or with a six-shooter.

Ambitious to be something more than a cattleman, although he would never entirely forsake the life to which he had been born, Gratton had attended law school in a Midwest city. His father had left him land and cattle in western Nebraska. During his absence, two faithful rannies, Rod Fergus and Hank Boyd, had tended stock for him.

But when he hung out his brand-new shingle, Grat found that clients were few and far between. He was just one lawyer too many in that settled community. Grat had sold his land and four-year-old cattle, invested part of the money in a herd of Herefords, and migrated farther West. In the town of Rosadero, he had learned that the Widow Dobson had a ranch for sale, and now, just forty-eight hours later, he was owner of that ranch. Perhaps there would be a chance for him to practice law on the side.

Shelby walked toward the corral, intending to saddle and ride down the range to see how the whitefaces fared after the long drive. Fergus and Boyd, on herd duty, would be glad to know they need look no farther for permanent grazing land. As he reached for the catch-rope on the gatepost, Grat heard a horse coming at a trail lope. He faced the south as the rider broke through the thicket, two hundred yards from the ranch building.

Seeing that it was a stranger, not Fergus or Boyd, Shelby waited with catch-rope in hand. The newcomer was wide-shouldered, thin-flanked, with a tawny mane and mustache, slightly protuberant eyes and high-bridged nose. He wrenched his sweating horse to a stand and said:

"Howdy, friend? That your herd of whitefaces down the range?"

"Yes," said Shelby. "I bought out Mrs. Dobson."

"Knowin' she had nothin' but a few longhorns, I figured that was it," went on the rider. "Been anxious to sell ever since the old man turned up his toes. I pushed ahead of my drive to drop in and get acquainted. I'm Russ Madden, boss of the Ladder brand up the valley. Havin' contracts to fill, I buy a good many cows across the line in Prairie County."

MADDEN leaned from the saddle and Shelby grasped his hand, smiling. "Right friendly of you to stop, Madden. Gratton Shelby's my name. This will be the Stirrup S outfit from now on—the brand on my cattle, if you noticed. Got time to 'light and have a snort? I brought some prime bourbon in my wagon."

"Never need a second invitation," grinned Madden, swinging a leg. As they started for the house, he asked, "Where you from?"

Gratton told him and inquired if the law profession was overcrowded in Rosadero. Madden's eyes narrowed a little as the man from Nebraska explained how he had failed to get a foothold in his home town. "I thought I'd move on to some place where a beginner could build up a practice. Mrs. Dobson said there wasn't too much law in the county."

"So you're a law sharp?" grunted Madden. "I'll say you don't look it. Better stick to raisin' cows, more money in it. What with a judge, a county attorney and a sheriff, we have just about all the law we can swallow in Broadaxe County. Mrs. Dobson was talkin' through her poke bonnet . . . say—" he paused on the kitchen threshold—"has the old lady left yet?"

"Drove off a few minutes before you came," replied Grat, wondering at his visitor's sudden wariness. "Afraid of her?"

"Naw, but her tongue's hung in the middle," laughed Madden. "Still, she ain't a holy terror like Mrs. Tal Garland. There's a lady who ain't backward about usin' a gun in an augerment. Tal, he's quiet-like, and the daughter, Eve, takes more after the old man."

"Interesting lot of people," remarked Shelby. He went to a cupboard, brought out a bottle and glasses.

"Here's luck to the Stirrup S brand!" said Russ Madden, and threw back his head and smacked his lips.

The lowing of cattle drifted to their ears. Stepping to the back door, they saw dust banners marking the approach of a herd along the road flanking the east boundary of Shelby's ranch.

"I'll join the outfit now," said Madden, holding out his hand; then he turned sharp about as hoofs clattered in the yard. Two riders were quirting straight for the house.

"My cowpokes," said Grat, descending the steps. "Something's up."

He didn't notice Madden's sly look, for his eyes were pinned to the flying horsemen. Rod Fergus and Hank Boyd reined up in a swirl of dust. Both were stringy, leather-faced old cow prods, who had worked for Grat's father. Their eyes were popping and Fergus yelled:

"Grat, that dad-burned trail outfit's got some of our whitefaces! We seen 'em throw twenty head or so into the drag. When they spied us comin', they cut loose with their artillery. Bein' outnumbered, we rode our spurs to get you."

"That galoot, there—" Boyd aimed his quirt handle at Madden—"is one of 'em. I noticed him ridin' point."

Shelby glanced quickly at his visitor, whose face had hardened. "What about it, Madden?"

"Your men are drunk or tryin' to start trouble," answered Russ. "How do I know you fellows ain't rustlers?"

Grat said, "I can show a bill of sale for those Herefords. Mrs. Dobson warned me they'd tempt certain shady characters round here. She mentioned no names, but I reckon that's why you were wary—"

Madden's hands dived for his brass-studded holsters. Shelby's right shoulder hunched — the tawny-haired man blinked. Madden was gazing into the muzzle of Grat's .45, and his clawing fingers relaxed on gunstocks.

"Lawyer, huh?" said Madden. "Sure you didn't study gunslingin' instead?"

Shelby rapped, "About face and head for the corral, Madden. We'll have a look at your herd. Rod, go on and saddle my bronc."

THE old ranny kicked his horse into a trot. Shelby relieved Madden of his hardware, tossing the guns to Boyd. They followed Fergus corralward. By the time Shelby and Madden were in the saddle, the trail herd was plodding past the ranch. Grat's six-shooter covered Russ as the four riders lined out for the dust-filmed column.

"Let the main bunch go by," said Shelby. "We're only interested in the drag."

Madden began to argue. "If there is any of your whitefaces with my cattle, they strayed into the herd. You know how it is when a drive crosses a range. It picks up—"

"Not this time!" Rod Fergus broke in stridently. "Our stock was grazin' 'way off the road when two of your men went at 'em, whoopin' and swingin' ropes!"

"That's what you say," fumed Madden. "We ain't thieves."

They were near enough the lowing cattle for Shelby to discern the branded flanks, despite the dust. "Box O, eh? Those longhorns have been driven hard. I suppose you have a bill of sale for 'em, Madden?"

"Uh course!" snapped the other. "But I ain't showin' it to you!"

A flank rider caught sight of them, swung his horse away from the horned column. He shouted to another man on swing and rode toward Shelby's party, fisting a gun. The second rider pounded after him.

Grat spoke to the Ladder boss. "Tell those fellows to stay back!"

Madden flapped his left hand at the nearing pair. "Hang with the herd, boys! You can't help me none."

They pulled up, conferred a moment, with slitted eyes on the strangers who obviously held their boss captive. Slowly they rode back to the herd. Stopping at the edge of the road, Shelby's party waited for the drag to come abreast of them. There must have been three or four hundred cattle in the herd, and Gratton had little doubt they had been stolen. When

he spotted the red-and-white stock shuffling along at the end of the column, he said to Madden:

"Still want to claim they strayed into your drive? It's plain enough what you are, Madden. If my men hadn't been riding herd you might have got away with it. Rod, you and Hank cut out—"

At that moment, three men popped from the dust beclouding the tail end of the column. Two carried saddle guns, and Shelby knew they were the rear guard riding with the drag man to watch for pursuers. He saw one guard pitch up his rifle as the old rannies reined forward to cut out the whitefaces. Grat's Colt flipped up, streaked flame. The rifleman jerked sideways, his Winchester exploding with the barrel tilted at an acute angle. It fell from loose fingers and his body hit the ground hard.

Rod and Hank had pulled .45's. The other rifleman, undismayed by his mate's violent passing, was throwing lead when the old rannies' guns barked in unison. The rustler seemed to leap with the shock of slugging bullets, spilled down in the dust a yard or two from his pardner.

The drag rider, armed only with a six-gun, cast a questioning look at his boss, sitting quiet under Shelby's menacing gun muzzle. The whitefaces, panic-stricken by the roaring guns, were breaking away from the main herd, a few of the nearest longhorns bunch-quitting with them.

"Let them strays go and stop our cattle, Pete!" bellowed Madden. He appealed to Shelby, "Put up that, will you? My man'll need help."

"He won't get any from you," said Grat sharply. "You and I are going to visit the sheriff at Rosadero. We'll stop this rustling before it's fairly started. You picked the wrong man to hoodle, Russ."

"You think you can put me in jail?" demanded Madden, suddenly defiant.

"I don't see why not, having caught you flat-footed," replied Grat. "Not only you, but all your gang. I know you never paid a dollar for those Box O longhorns."

Madden exposed his teeth in a wolfish grin. "You've a lot to learn, lawyer-man. The sheriff's name is Bill Ribsam, if you want to know."

CHAPTER II

ROD Fergus and Hank Boyd, having headed off the whitefaces, were driving them toward Shelby's range. The drag rider had turned the dozen or so longhorns back into the herd. Hipping in the saddle, he hollered, "You comin', Russ?"

"Not now," his boss yelled back. "This young squirt figures to land me in the calaboose. Tell the boys to drive on to the ranch. I'll be up sooner or later."

"It'll be later, much later, Madden," said Shelby, though he was puzzled at the cow thief's confident air.

The drag rider went on at a choppy run. Slowly the herd wound over the plain, with no sign that Madden's men were coming to his rescue. Fergus and Boyd loped back to the road, asking what was next.

"Dig a hole for those rifle-toters," said Grat, nodding toward the sprawled figures, "then stick with the whitefaces. I'm taking Madden to town. No, I won't need you fellows. I'll have daylight all the way if his men try any shenanigans."

"Get that out of your head," said Madden. "They ain't worryin' no more than I am."

Rosadero, as the county seat of Broadaxe, boasted more than the usual number of cowtown false fronts, even a few brick buildings. Of the latter, one was the courthouse, another the county jail. Grat Shelby and his prisoner rode down the main street as night was falling. There had been no trouble en route. Cattlemen and cowpunchers, with a sprinkling of townsmen, stared from the sidewalks as they passed by. As they muttered among themselves, the looks they cast at Shelby smacked of disapproval. Several answered Madden's salutations with upraised hands.

It was a surprising reception, but Shelby was a newcomer and perhaps they didn't know Madden was a hungry looper. Grat noticed a tall girl and a chunky, middle-aged woman watching them from

the hotel veranda. Madden jerked his head.

"Eve Garland and her ma."

Grat's interest mounted. Mother and daughter were garbed alike in sombreros, leather jackets and riding skirts. The old lady had a broad, moon-face in keeping with her figure. The girl's features were delicate by contrast, with a certain firmness about the rounded chin which stamped her as self-reliant. Grat thought he read approval in her blue eyes as they met his for an instant. It was a look that comforted him after running the gantlet of masculine disapprobation.

The jail had a deserted appearance as he pulled up by the hitchrack, tying his horse and Madden's. There was a broad grin on the rustler's face as Shelby strode to the door and found it locked. A tobacco-chewing citizen, hovering near, offered the information:

"If you're lookin' for Sheriff Ribsam, him and his deputies and Jedge Taney are off on a fishin' trip. Be back tomorrow, I reckon. Howdy, Russ? You in a jackpot?"

"I look it, don't I?" chuckled Madden, bound hard and fast in the saddle. "This fellow's been havin' fun with me, but I can take a joke. Since he can't lock me up, he'll have to turn me loose."

Shelby slowly returned to the hitchrack. "Don't fool yourself, Madden. I'll wait for the sheriff. Must be some place where I can hold you overnight."

Madden's face fell. "Downright bullheaded, ain't you? I'd advise cuttin' these ropes. Safer for you. Didn't hear no cheerin' when you fetched me in—"

Paying no attention to the outburst, Grat stepped back in the saddle. He didn't think much of the law's administration in Rosadero, with the sheriff locking the jail and going off with the judge on a pleasure trip. Rosadero had lighted its kerosene lamps as he started back up the thoroughfare, leading Madden's mount. Mrs. Garland and her daughter had left the hotel veranda. Reining in at the nearest saloon rack, Shelby untied the rustler's feet, gripped his shoulder and pushed him through the batwings.

HALTING a few steps from the door, Grat surveyed the bar lineup. Everyone, including the bartenders, had faced his way. When he chose to use it, young Shelby had the kind of voice that could sway a jury. It was in that persuasive tone that he addressed the frowning crowd.

"I'm your new neighbor, Gratton Shelby, gentlemen. This afternoon I caught Russ Madden making away with about twenty head of my Hereford stock. Rustling, on the face of it, though he tried to pass off the felony afterward by saying the whitefaces had strayed into his drive. Finding the jail closed, I'm looking for a place to lock up Madden for the night. The sheriff, I've been told, will return tomorrow."

A bartender said quickly, "You can't leave him here, that's flat!"

"Nor any other place in town, I reckon," added a lantern-jawed stockman. "What's the truth of this, Russ?"

"You know me, Yates," returned the cow thief. "There's not a man in this room can accuse me of ever liftin' a critter of his. Shelby is just a smart guy. Says he's a lawyer. His cattle were picked up in my drive by accident, but he's tryin' to make somethin 'out of it."

"If you take my advice, young man—" Yates shifted gaze to Grat Shelby—"you'll set Madden free and forget it. He has plenty of friends."

"So I notice." Grat kept his anger in leash. "Not the type of men I'd expect to side with a rustler, either. I don't understand it, but I'm holding him for the sheriff."

Grat shoved Madden back onto the sidewalk, the rustler resisting as much as he could with his hands tied.

"I'm tired of bein' pushed around," he growled. "You can see everyone's against you. It'll be safer—"

But Grat propelled him toward his horse, boosted him into the saddle and retied his feet. The young cowman realized it would be futile to seek a temporary prison for Madden elsewhere in that unfriendly town. In fact, if he remained, those strangely acting cattlemen might

attempt to liberate the rustler by dosing his captor with lead medicine.

Madden was swearing as they loped for the outskirts of Rosadero. Grat turned the horses from the highway into a small clearing, flanked by low bushes and a tree or two. Pulling the prisoner to the ground, he loosened the saddle cinches, not sure but that he might have need of the horses in a hurry before the night was over.

"We goin' to set here all night?" fumed Madden.

"That's the program," said Shelby. "Go to sleep if you want. I'm sitting up."

The outlaw stretched out as well as his bonds would permit, complaining because he had no saddle for a headrest. In about half an hour, hoofbeats sounded on the trail to town. Shadowy horsemen drifted past the clearing, talking, though Grat couldn't catch what they said. As they rode on into Rosadero, Madden struggled to sitting posture, grumbling:

"I can't sleep. Roll me a quirly, will you, Shelby?"

Grat, seated with his back against a tree trunk, complied. He put the cigarette in Madden's mouth, struck a match for for him. The rustler turned his head from side to side as he smoked.

"Why'n't you light one yourself, Shelby? Helps pass the time."

"Believe I will." Grat built another quirly. Noting that the outlaw still kept turning his head, he asked, "What're you listening for, Madden?"

"Who's listenin'!" retorted the cow thief.

EVEN as he answered, the faint scuff of leather dragged across the ground reached Grat's ears. The sound came from beyond the tree and he shifted cautiously, laying hand to six-shooter. In the same instant Madden, spitting out his cigarette stub, threw himself flat, yelling:

"Target that quirly, boys!"

A Colt flashed in the brush and a bullet fanned Shelby's cheek. He crouched against the tree trunk. A second bullet sped by, ripping bark from the tree. Peering around the bole, Grat threw his gun forward. When the next shot came, he answered it. There was a yell of pain and a violent thrashing in the brush. Two more guns opened up; bullets thudded into the oak. Shelby triggered back, and from the scrambling that ensued guessed he had made his enemies' position untenable.

Remembering the horsemen who had entered town, he had no doubt he was fighting some of Madden's gang, not the cattlemen. The prisoner had recognized their voices and knew that someone in Rosadero would quickly inform them he had been taken outside. Cagey Madden had asked for a cigarette, urged Shelby to smoke one so that, when the tobacco scent guided his friends to the spot, the glow of Grat's quirly would make him a target while Russ hugged the ground. He had been listening for their approach, as Shelby suspected.

While the brush crackled beyond the tree, the roar of a gun in the road apprised Grat of a rear assault. He faced about at the foot of the tree, sinking to spurred heels. Shots kept coming from the road. He rocked his hammer, then bounced off his heels in Madden's direction.

"If they keep it up, you're stopping their lead!" Shelby pulled the prisoner from the ground. Madden cursed and writhed, making himself hard to hold.

At that moment hoofs drummed out along the road from town; six-guns made fiery streaks in the velvet blackness. Briefly the Colts of Madden's men replied to the bombardment, then the firing thinned out and a high-pitched feminine voice cried:

"Where's the hombre that had the nerve to bag Russ Madden? Sing out, boy, if you're still alive!"

"Here!" Grat shouted. Though he had never heard her speak, he would have said that voice belonged to Mrs. Tal Garland.

He saw four riders wheel into the clearing. They drew rein near Shelby and his prisoner. One rider scratched a match

on his saddle, remarking that it was safe enough now, with Madden's gang hitting for the tall timber. The tiny glow gave Shelby a glimpse of Mrs. Garland, her daughter, and two men who looked like cowhands, each with a bared pistol.

"I'm sure obliged to you Garlands for jumping in," said Grat. "It was getting pretty hot around here."

"So we figured, when we saw Madden's owlhooters come in, then head right out after a word with the cowmen," replied Mrs. Garland. "I says to Eve we ought to give you a hand, seein' you showed more sand than anybody round here by capturin' that sidewinder Madden. Light another match, Joe. How'd you know our name, stranger?"

"Madden told me."

The old lady shot a venomous look at the outlaw. "You know what'd happen to you if I had my way, you bug-eyed mavericker? You'd swing!"

"I don't want no trouble with you, ma'am," muttered Madden.

"Bet you don't! I'm not afraid of you or any man livin'. Wish I could say the same for Tal Garland and the rest of the cattlemen. By bein' friendly with you owlhooters, they hope their herds will be safe from raidin'. Don't care how much you steal down in Prairie County. It's mighty cowardly accordin' to my way of thinkin'."

"So that's the reason they stood by Madden!" exclaimed Grat. "It had me puzzled."

"That's it," Eve Garland got a word in edgewise. "Pa probably won't like our siding you against Madden, but we did it anyhow. Just in case his gang returns, I think we ought to finish out the night with you, Mr. —"

"Gratton Shelby, now running the old Dobson ranch under a new brand, Stirrup S. Pleased to have you stay if it won't make trouble in the family."

"Don't let that worry you, Shelby," said the redoubtable Mrs. Garland. "I can handle Tal up to a certain point. I ain't sayin' you'll get satisfaction from Sheriff Ribsam or Judge Taney, but at least you can try."

CHAPTER III

JUDGE AMOS TANEY, a little the worse for his fishing excursion, inserted his key in the lock of the courthouse door. His corpulent body was squeezed into a Prince Albert and too-tight trousers, a black sombrero sat askew on his grizzled head. His late companion, Sheriff Bill Ribsam, crossed the street swiftly as the judge got the door open.

"Somethin' must've happened while we were away, Amos! Here comes Russ Madden, trussed up like a turkey, with a stranger and them Garland women."

"Huh?" The judge turned bloodshot eyes on the cavalcade heading for the courthouse. "Looks like Russ has been getting careless. That's bad. You meet 'em, Bill."

He went inside, while the hawk-faced Ribsam lingered at the door. His chill gaze swept over the party as they swung up to the curb. Shelby, dismounting, had the prisoners' feet free in a jiffy. The sheriff, tipping his hat to Eve and her mother, focused attention on the two men.

"What's Madden been doin', fellow?" asked Ribsam, as Grat pushed the prisoner up the steps.

Shelby briefly explained. "I'm ready to turn him over to you, sheriff. If court's open, we're just in time for a hearing."

Ribsam clapped a hand on Madden's shoulder. "C'mon, then."

Judge Taney had climbed to his bench when they entered the courtroom, Grat walking with the two Garland women. He stepped forward to lodge complaint. The judge listened with an expressionless face. Finally he asked Shelby:

"Did you see Madden throw those Herefords of yours into his herd?"

"No. His men did it. My cowhands saw them, were fired on when they tried to stop it. I'd have brought them along as witnesses, but I felt it wasn't safe to leave the whitefaces unguarded. Had a fight with the gang, killed two. The cattle Madden was driving were Box O longhorns. I understand his brand is the Ladder—"

"We're not talking about any cattle

but your Herefords, Shelby," the judge interrupted, frowning. "What you got to say, Russ?"

Madden, grinning, declared the white-faces had strayed into his drive as it was passing Shelby's range. "Just accident, judge."

Taney cleared his throat. "I believe you. Case dismissed."

"But you haven't heard my witnesses yet—" began Grat.

"Case dismissed!" the judge repeated loudly.

Mrs. Garland, eluding her daughter's grasp, clumped to the bench. "You mean you ain't goin' to try this brush-runner, Taney?" she shrilled. "Everybody knows he's a thief—"

The judge rapped with his gavel. "If you ain't careful, ma'am, I'll fine you for contempt of court!"

"Try and get it, you fat rascal!" Mrs. Garland defied him. "How were the fish bitin' yesterday? What did you use for bait—empty half pints? Reckon you did more drinkin' than fishin', you sot!"

Judge Taney half rose, shouting, "You can't talk that way to me! Arrest her, Bill!"

The sheriff made a wary advance. Mrs. Garland wheeled, jerking the gun from her holster. She rammed the muzzle against Ribsam's chest. "Now lay a hand on me, Bill Ribsam! You and the judge together don't make one fair-size law and order man."

Ribsam turned a helpless look on Taney. The latter, keeping a watchful eye on the irate range woman, growled, "All right, Bill. Let the old catamount go."

As the sheriff stepped back, Mrs. Garland stuck gun in leather, a faint grin on her moon-face. "Old catamount, eh? Anyway, you see I've got claws and ain't backward about usin' 'em. Guess you're euchered, Grat."

"Seems so," Shelby answered. "Not much law in this county, that's a fact, and its citizens are partly to blame. A pity more of them aren't like you and your daughter, Mrs. Garland."

He cast a significant look at Madden. "Remember I'm a lawyer." Grat put on his hat and started for the street door, Eve and her mother falling into step with him.

AFTER breakfast at a restaurant, Eve suggested that Grat ride home with them and meet her father. If Shelby had thought there was any likelihood of the Madden gang revisiting his ranch, following the release of the boss rustler, he would have postponed the trip to the Garland ranch. But he believed the rustlers would be busy burning the brands on the Box O longhorns. He found Eve fascinating, admired her mother, and was eager to see what her father was like, discuss with him the surprising circumstances which permitted a known cow thief and his band to ride high in the county.

Before leaving Rosadero, they were joined by the two Garland cowhands who had helped disperse Madden's would-be rescuers the night previous. Since Judge Taney had turned their leader loose, Grat couldn't understand why the gang had jumped him, losing a man or two in the unsuccessful attempt, unless there had been some doubt of what action the law would take or they had wanted to rub Shelby out.

About noon, the party of five sighted the Garland ranch. A good-sized outfit, Grat judged, by the number of buildings. A tall, white-haired man, rather distinguished-looking, came down the porch steps as they reined up in the yard. Grat saw at once where Eve had got her good looks.

"I was beginnin' to think I ought to ride after you folks," Tal Garland greeted his wife and daughter. "What delayed you?"

"Trouble with the polecats you and your friends let carry on with a high hand, Tal," replied Mrs. Garland, easing her bulk out of the saddle. "First that booze-hound of a judge threatened to fine me for contempt of court, then he was goin' to have me arrested for tellin' the truth about him to his face."

Tal Garland looked concerned. "You're a little quick on the trigger sometimes, Kate."

"Bill Ribsam thought so, at any rate," she chuckled.

"Let me tell it, Ma," said Eve. "But first, Pa, I want to introduce Mr. Gratton Shelby. He's a lawyer and a cattleman."

Grat, sliding from the saddle, shook Tal's hand. "Glad to know you, Mr. Garland. Amazing situation in your county."

"I guess I grasp your meanin'," returned Garland. "Hope you didn't have a run-in with Russ Madden." At that, his daughter opened up about the attempted rustling and what followed. The old cowman listened with a serious expression. "You and your ma shouldn't have mixed in. It may get Madden down on us, start him workin' on our cattle."

Grat Shelby's mouth tightened. "It was risky for two women to do what they did, Mr. Garland, but I sure admire their grit. You look man-size, like you wouldn't let anyone walk over you, and I can't understand this fear of a bunch of bad hats. Why don't you clean 'em out?"

"Easier said than done," replied Garland. "Madden has any number of gunmen on his payroll. They're firmly rooted at his ranch, the Ladder brand, which is a regular fort. We haven't bothered them because they don't bother us. Prairie County is their raidin' ground. We feel it's up to the Prairie lawmen to trap them if they can, keep hands off ourselves so long as the Madden gang don't steal cows in Broadaxe County. Until he grabbed your whitefaces, Russ hasn't touched a longhorn on this side of the county line that I know of."

"And I can't expect any help from the law or my neighbors in going after him?" said Grat, his lip curling. "Not that I'm asking it. There's still one law that works with men like Madden." He tapped his holster.

"It seems you've already had some help from the Garland outfit." Tal smiled faintly, eyeing his wife and daughter. "We're not prepared to fight Madden alone, and I know how my neighbors feel about keepin' him off their necks. I don't say we're right, givin' Russ all the rope he wants, but that's how things are run here. I'm afraid you're a marked man for capturin' Russ. And it didn't do any good."

Grat looked his disgust. "A little backbone is what's needed in Broadaxe County. My old daddy, if he was living, would disown me if I crawled to a cow thief."

INSTEAD of resenting this, Garland grinned admiringly. "I believe you'd try to go through with anything you started, Shelby, but you're outnumbered here. Let's hope we're makin' a mountain out of a molehill, that Russ won't attempt a follow-up move."

He turned toward the house with his wife, while the cowboys rode off with the horses. Eve, following with Grat, whispered:

"You gave Pa a jolt. I think he only needs a couple more to make him come out against the owlhooters."

Grat smiled at her eager face. "I hope you're right, Miss Eve."

He had lunch with the Garlands, and afterward Tal and his daughter took the visitor for a ride around the range. Garland bred good longhorn stuff, but Grat knew his Herefords were superior as beef. He could understand, in a measure, why Garland and his friends didn't want to bring about the chaotic conditions resulting from a war with rustlers. But he didn't excuse their supine attitude.

Shelby said good-by late in the afternoon and headed down to his own ranch. Darkness overtook him on the way. He was startled out of his leisurely road-jog by a red reflection in the sky. The backbone of a ridge cut off his view of the Stirrup S, but those ominously glowing clouds indicated a fire at or in the vicinity of his ranch. Grat raced for the ridgetop.

One look below and he kept riding hard, checking the loads in his six-gun. His bunkhouse, wagon shed and corral were burning. The ranch house itself appeared untouched as yet. Russ Madden had struck again, in revenge, just as Tal Garland had predicted. Sooner than either he or Grat had expected.

Hearing no crackle of gunfire as he sped through the gateway of the ranch yard, Shelby wondered if Rod Fergus

and Hank Boyd had already paid with their lives for resisting the raiders. It seemed certain they would have left the Herefords to defend the home ranch when they saw the flames from afar.

As Grat checked his swift pace, listening to the yells at the rear of the yard, a man with a flaring torch sprang around the side of the house, leaped onto the porch. Unaware of Shelby's arrival, he wrenched open the door. For a split second he was a sinister silhouette in the doorway, and Grat's Colt flamed. The raider, with a scream, toppled inside, flinging the torch ahead of him.

Swinging from the saddle, Grat plunged up the steps, cleared the motionless form near the door and snatched up the burning brand. The well-worn carpet was smoldering and he stamped on it hurriedly. Nearing shouts and the pounding of booted feet told him that the raiders were coming to investigate the powder blast. Grat thought fast. If he barred the door, tried to hold the house against them, they were sure to fire it to drive him out. Better to run and draw them after him. He'd at least have a fighting chance in the open, perhaps save the house by creating a diversion.

Grat whisked through the door, torch in one hand, gun in the other. Bandanna-faced men were rounding the house corner. He hurled the torch at them and they scattered like a wolf pack to escape the burning brand. In that brief moment of confusion, Grat was across the porch, down the steps and grabbing for the reins of his shying horse.

He fired as he topped the bronc and reined away. A rustler slid to his knees, coughing rackingly. The torch had gone out, but as Shelby put his horse to a gallop, lead buzzed about him like the outpouring of a nest of yellowjackets. He spurred down the yard, with the gang after him in full cry. Sweeping past the blazing bunkhouse, he saw no sign of his two cowhands, dead or alive.

The thud of boots ceased and was succeeded by the clatter of hoofs. The raiders had shifted to horseback to continue the chase. They were closing in on Shelby as he neared the thicket south of the ranch buildings. He sent his horse sideways into the brush, rolled out of the saddle and hunkered down to refill the empty chambers of his .45. If they wanted to get him they'd have to beat the brush. The pursuing hoofbeats stilled; then the brush crackled at two widely separated points. Grat tripped his hammer twice, saw the red spurt of answering shots.

CHAPTER IV

FOR flaming seconds, Grat swapped lead with the two brush-runners, shifting his position after each shot. They could have done the same, prolonging the gunfight and giving their mates a chance to move in on every side at once, if Shelby hadn't tagged both with lead at the outset. He must have mortally wounded the man burrowing through the brush on the left, for his gun was suddenly silent. The other began to retreat, dragging himself slowly, the breath rasping in his lungs.

It looked as though Shelby had the edge, that they couldn't dig him out of that covert without risking the loss of every man of the party. While he listened for sounds of their withdrawal, there was a burst of flame outside the thicket. The brilliant light shot upward in a long arc and dropped into the brush not far from Grat. Where the torch landed, the dry mesquite began to burn fiercely. A second blazing pine knot followed quickly, setting fire to another part of the thicket. Apparently Grat was in as desperate straits as if he had barricaded the ranch house and fought until it became a fire trap. But not quite.

With gun reloaded, he darted for his horse, already showing signs of fear as the flames ate through the brush. Choking the bridle, he led the animal toward the south side of the thicket. There was a faint patter of hoofs to right and left, as the cow thieves scattered to surround the brushy area and down him as he broke cover. His one chance was to get out before they had him completely hemmed in. Walking his horse, talking to quiet it, he didn't think the raiders could

hear him because of the crackling flames.

Colt in hand, Grat stepped clear of the last brush clump. Horsemen were approaching from either side of the thicket, but were not yet in sight. He led his horse thirty yards farther, then mounted. There had been no outcry, no powder-burning, so his flight hadn't been detected. Glancing back he saw two riders blackly outlined against the flaming brush. Waiting for him to come out. They'd wait a long time.

Shelby let his horse run, which it was eager to do, when he judged he was a safe distance from the murderous band. The next thing was to discover if his Herefords had been taken. Perhaps the gang had stopped to burn his ranch, intending to work down the range afterward and collect his cattle. But, as he rode with the night wind in his face, Grat saw nothing of the herd. The whinnying of a horse caused him to turn toward a depression in the prairie.

He discerned two animals as he pulled up on the rim of the sunken place. Thinking they might be Fergus's and Boyd's cow horses, Grat dropped from leather. As he slipped down into the hollow, he stumbled over a yielding body. There were two of them, side by side. With a sharp oath, Grat drew out his matchbox.

The two old rannies were breathing and that gave Shelby a ray of hope. Each clasped a gun. About them were strewn the empty shells of cartridges used in a last-ditch fight against a superior force. Grat left them to scoop a hatful of water from the near-by creek. Dashed in the seamed, leathery old faces, it had the effect of reviving Rod, but his sidekick Hank still lay with eyes closed.

"It's Grat, Fergus," said Shelby, kneeling beside him.

"Where you been so long?" quavered the oldster. "Why didn't you come home? Hank and me stuck by the herd, like you told us. Nothin' happened till just after dark tonight. Then a gang come rompin' down. Drove us back to this low place. We fought till we couldn't raise a gun no more." He paused, panting. "Guess they got the whitefaces, eh?"

"Yes, Rod."

"Well, they outnumbered but they didn't outgame us. How's Hank?"

"Worse than you, I reckon, and you're in bad enough shape. Lie still, old hand. I won't mind losing the cattle so much if you and Hank pull through. They were burning the ranch when I came home. I blame myself for not being here, Rod. But I didn't figure on Madden moving so fast."

"Didn't you turn him over to the sheriff at Rosadero?" asked Fergus.

"Sheriff!" repeated Grat bitterly. "There's no law in Broadaxe County . . . wait, Hank's stirring!"

WHEN Grat rode up to the ranch at daybreak, he faced a scene of devastation that made him clench his teeth. The brush from which he had escaped was a blackened stubble, and the raiders had fired the ranch house before leaving. Like the bunkhouse, wagon shed, and corral, it was a smoking heap of wreckage. Shelby had noticed the trail of the Herefords as he came up the range. The herd had been driven north.

As he saw it now, part of the gang had taken charge of the whitefaces while the others dropped out to destroy every stick of his property. If Russ Madden hoped to get away with it, he should have killed and buried Gratton Shelby in the ruins of his ranch. The law, a weak and futile thing in Broadaxe County up to now, had a new champion in the somber-eyed young man slowly circling the ravaged area.

Traveling by easy stages, Shelby got his injured cowhands to the Garland ranch late that day. He felt it was the only place where they would be safe while recuperating, since Madden and his men had the run of the town. And he wanted Garland to see the result of harboring owlhooters. When he looked at the lead-bitten old-timers and heard how Shelby had been cleaned out, the cattleman was visibly moved.

"Madden ought to be made to answer for this," said Tal heatedly. "I'll talk to some of my friends, but I can't promise anything. What about your Herefords?"

"Driven to his ranch, of course," replied Grat. "Tell me where it is, and if you don't care to help, I'll go alone."

Eve and her mother were both present. The girl said quickly, "Don't think of it, Gratton. You'd only throw your life away."

Mrs. Garland added sharply, "Wouldn't let him go alone, would you, Tal? Now's the time to act."

Garland fidgeted. "I've got to talk it over with the others, Kate. Russ has so many men in his gang, one outfit ain't big enough to fight him. We'd have to act together. I'm afraid Shelby's experience will only make the cattlemen more determined to let Madden be, but I'll talk to 'em."

Turning on his heel, Grat strode out to the three horses in the yard. Eve was at his side before he could mount. He answered her anxious question with a slow smile, warmed by her interest.

"No, Eve, I'm not visiting the Ladder ranch today. I think your father is coming to his senses. I'm going to town for the doctor. While there, I'll look around for an office to rent. Since I'm out of the cow business at present, I've got to do something. I'm having a new sign painted—the old one was burned—and starting to practice law again. I may not be overrun with clients at first, but there should be plenty of them once the cowmen of this county decide Madden and his kind must go."

Eve's blue eyes sparkled. "Wonderful, Gratton! Only you'll come in contact with the Madden outfit. They go to Rosadero often."

"Hope I do." Shelby rose to the saddle and grinned down at her. "If he runs too hard on the rope, he may not last to face me in a courtroom."

It was fortunate that Shelby carried what money he had in a belt around his waist or it would have gone up in smoke. Within two days he had rented an office on the first floor of a main street building, nailed the new signboard beside the door: *Gratton Shelby, Attorney at Law.* At a clothing store he bought a suit of broadcloth, more befitting a professional man than woolen shirt and chaps. But he wore his gunbelt under the frock coat. The law books he had brought from Nebraska in his trail wagon had been destroyed in the fire, and none was obtainable in Rosadero. He purchased a desk and a chair, sat down to await clients.

His only visitors during the first week were Judge Amos Taney and Phil Holcomb, the weasel-faced county attorney. They arrived together, smelling of whisky, and glanced scornfully about the almost bare office.

"What made you quit the cattle trade, Shelby?" asked the judge.

Grat smiled thinly. "Guess you know the answer to that. My herd was stolen, my ranch burned, my hands shot up. Someday I'll drag the marauders into your court, and it won't be so easy to dismiss the case next time."

"You had nothing on Russ Madden," muttered Taney.

"I don't like to discourage a professional brother," Holcomb said in an oily voice, "but there's not enough law business to keep two of us busy."

"There will be, if the cowmen wake up," said Grat. "I think we're due for a fresh deal."

GRAT'S words were prophetic. Early the next morning, as he was returning from breakfast at the restaurant, Grat spied a bunch of horsemen out on the plain west of town. They were heading north at a rolling gallop, too far away for Grat to be sure of their identity, though one looked like Russ Madden. Shelby entered his office.

The past night had been a feverish one, with all the outfits but Madden's in Rosadero out to blow their month's pay. They were now sleeping off their potations. Eve had come to the county seat with her father; for the ride, she said, though Grat liked to think she had wanted to see how he was getting along. Tal had sounded out his neighbors, but they were not in favor of making any move to incur the wrath of the Madden gang. What had happened to Shelby could happen to them. Let sleeping dogs lie.

Grat, restless with nothing to do, finished a cigarette and walked to the front

window, seeking a glimpse of Eve at the hotel across the street, where she had passed the night. As he stood there, she stepped onto the veranda with her father. Grat flung open his office door. At that moment, a band of riders swept into the street from the west. He stood in the doorway as they came on, surprised to notice one with a sheriff's star, though it wasn't Bill Ribsam. Two men in the cavalcade were tied to their mounts.

The newcomers halted in midstreet as Tal Garland and some of his friends hailed them. Up the sidewalk came Sheriff Ribsam and his deputies at a double-quick. Grat Shelby quickly joined the crowd. Ribsam was yammering:

"What you doin' up here, Sheriff Corday? Looks like you're leadin' a posse."

"That's what it is," returned the other lawman. "We stopped a raid of Madden's gang across the county line, captured two of his men." He jerked a thumb toward the bound horsemen. "Bein' close on their heels, we paid no mind to the line, hopin' to run the rest of 'em down. Are they hidin' here in Rosadero?"

"No, they ain't," snarled Ribsam, "and you can't carry on no manhunt in my bailiwick, Corday! You have no authority—"

"I know, I know," snorted the Prairie County sheriff, "but we're plumb tired of you Broadaxe folks harborin' them outlaws. You make no effort to clean 'em up. Long as they don't bother you you don't care how much they rustle down our way. It's got to stop. We're goin' to patrol our side of the county line hereafter and drill every owlhooter that crosses it."

An idea struck Shelby. Nearly all the Broadaxe County cattlemen were present. It might be a favorable moment to rouse them against the rustler element. He spoke to Sheriff Corday.

"A bunch of horsemen, riding hard, passed by the town about a half hour ago. Madden's gang, I reckon. If they find Prairie County closed to them as plundering ground, it's a safe bet they'll start raiding the men who have befriended them." Grat looked past the irate Ribsam, seeking Tal Garland. "Why don't you strike while the iron's hot, Garland? Gather your neighbors and join this posse of Corday's. Make a mass attack on Madden's ranch fort and wipe him out. You'll be saving yourselves trouble later on, the way I see it."

"I'm willin'," said Garland, looking around at his friends.

"We don't want no interference from Prairie County," bawled Sheriff Ribsam. "Kill our own snakes, if any. You've got no right trailin' nobody through here, Corday, and I'm warnin' you to backtrack fast before we start smokin' you up!"

THE sheriff's speech inflamed all the Broadaxe cowmen with the exception of Garland. They didn't believe Madden would turn on them and looked upon Corday and his posse as trespassers. They roared a protest, and Bill Ribsam, pleased at the support he was getting, flung hand to .45.

"Turn them prisoners loose and get goin', Corday!" he yelled. "You can't arrest nobody in my county!"

Grat knew that one shot would start the men of both counties smoking each other up. With a leap, Shelby was on top of the sheriff, wrestling with him for possession of the Colt. Ribsam strained and cursed, but the bone-breaking grip of Shelby's hands was overpowering. As he wrenched away Ribsam's gun, Sheriff Corday remarked:

"Good for you, young feller! We ain't surrenderin' these prisoners because we took 'em on our side of the line. Let's go, boys," he addressed his grim possemen. "We don't want any trouble with these misguided fools, but they'd better pass along the warnin' to their pet waddies that Prairie County is closed to raiders!"

Dust puffed up as the cavalcade wheeled, trotted back along the street and turned south. Grat handed Ribsam his gun, pushed back the skirt of his frock coat to reveal hip-slung Colt. He looked coldly at Ribsam and the sheriff's eyes fell before that bleak gaze. But he knew Ribsam had it in for him as he stamped away.

Grat felt a hand on his arm and faced

Eve, her mouth corners drawn down. "Too bad they wouldn't listen to you. They'll live to regret it."

"I think so, too," said Grat gravely.

He was in the Bronc Rider Saloon a few nights later when horses stopped outside. Presently Russ Madden and his men slammed into the barroom. The boss rustler looked to be in a vile humor. Several of his riders, Grat observed, wore bloody bandages. Although they had undoubtedly received warning, through Sheriff Ribsam, that Prairie County was patrolling its side of the line, the owlhooters apparently had taken a chance on breaking through and suffered defeat.

Finding himself shoulder to shoulder with Madden at the bar, Shelby shifted whisky glass to his left hand, leaving the right free to slap holster. He felt the rustler's hot breath on his cheek, turned.

"How's lawin'?" asked Madden. "I heard you got your shingle out."

"Not good," replied Grat briefly.

The rustler reached for a bottle. "It'll be worse before it's better, Shelby."

Before the week was out, the Broadaxe County cattlemen were missing longhorns. They gathered in Rosadero to drink and cuss. Such ingratitude on Madden's part! Shelby told them, "You know who's doing it. Bring the thieves into court and I'll fight your case. I'll even help you bring them in. If the sheriff won't act, kick him out of office. Form a vigilance committee if necessary."

Tal Garland agreed with Shelby that Sheriff Ribsam and Judge Taney were tools of the rustlers. Now thoroughly aroused, Garland was for vigilante action, talked it up every chance he got. His neighbors still feared the Madden gunslingers, but that fear began to wear thin as their losses mounted. Madden became slightly worried as he got wind of secret meetings among the cowmen. He knew Shelby and Garland were responsible for the vigilante movement. If both were killed before the rangemen were prepared to act, the organization might fall apart.

One night as Grat sat working on legal-looking papers by the light of his kerosene lamp, he raised his head as a horse turned into the street at racing stride. It slithered to a halt. He went to the door, and Eve Garland staggered in, powdered with dust of a hard ride.

CHAPTER V

EVE GARLAND'S eyes were tragic as she announced, "They've murdered Pa! And I'm sure they're on the way down to kill you, Grat!"

Shelby drew in his breath sharply. "Your father!" He pulled his chair forward, and as Eve sank into it, perched on a desk corner, his gaze intent. "Tell me about it."

"There isn't much time, they're not far behind me," said Eve. "But here it is: Yates and Anson, the two cowmen who've been hardest to convince they ought to act in unison with the others, dropped in on Pa this evening. Seems they'd got up their nerve at last, wanted to join the vigilantes. Ma and I were washing dishes, with the help of your old rannies. We didn't hear any horses in the yard.

"Yates and Anson, who told about it afterward, said there was a knock on the door and when Pa answered it, he couldn't see anyone. But a gun spurted from the porch shadows and a voice snapped, 'That's your needin's, Tal!' Both Yates and Anson were sure it was Madden's voice."

"Knowing him so well, they couldn't mistake it," said Grat, a gleam in his eyes. "With them as witnesses, we'll convict Madden for that murder quicker than all the rustling he's done. No shots fired at Yates and Anson?"

"They hunted cover," replied Eve scornfully. "I had a terrible time keeping Ma from rushing out while those killers were in the yard. Seven of them, as I discovered later, waiting under the trees to get more of us. When I saw them start south toward town, I thought of you, Grat. If they removed you and Pa, they wouldn't have much to fear from the other cowmen. I saddled my horse, took a roundabout way to the main road—"

A gun exploded in the street and Shelby's office window cascaded shards of glass. Grat swept the lamp from the desk,

grabbed Eve and pulled her to the floor. Palming gunstock, he crept to the door and shot the bolt. More bullets smashed through the broken window. He took a quick look outside. Dim figures were strung along the edge of the sidewalk. Madden's gang evidently had left their horses downstreet. Eve's mount was trotting off, dragging its reins. Grat threw a shot and ducked below the window sill. Someone yelled and fell with a thud.

Bullets hailed into the office, chopping out what remained of the window glass, splintering the framework. Eve spoke at Grat's elbow.

"I have a gun. Let me help."

Grat faced her in the dark. "You can, at that. I'd like to lay hands on Madden alive, if possible. They know you're in here, having seen your horse, but may not figure on your taking a hand. Suppose you could drop a bullet through the window now and then without getting shot, while I go out the back way?"

"Sure I can, Grat."

"Be careful, now." He pressed her shoulder and was gone. Eve's gun roared and a volley answered as he hurried through his living quarters behind the office. Unlocking the back door, he stepped out and advanced cautiously up the alley. Eve was still drawing their fire with well-spaced shots. The bent figure of a man was visible at the corner of the building. He spoke as Grat came on tiptoe, hammer prong eared back.

"We're gettin' nowhere fast, boys. Have to break down that door—"

Russ Madden didn't finish, for a gun was suddenly jammed against his neck.

"It's Shelby, Madden!" rapped Grat. "That's Miss Eve at the window. Drop your cutters! Tell those lobos to hightail it!"

Madden hesitated but an instant. His guns slipped to the boardwalk. "Hey, boys, that law sharp's got me dead to rights! Scatter!"

Over Madden's shoulder, Shelby saw the other rustlers jerk about, heard their profane expressions of surprise. They shuffled along the sidewalk, peering at the dark figure behind the boss rustler. A wink of flame at the office window increased their pace.

"Keep moving or your boss will get it like he gave it to Tal Garland!" warned Grat. "Don't stop till you're outside the town limits!"

"How about that, Russ?" asked a cow thief, his step dragging.

"Shelby's keen to drill me," answered Madden. "Do like he says."

THE rustlers vanished downstreet. Rosadero's citizens were trickling from doorways, but not offering to take sides. Eve came out of the lawyer's office as Grat marched past with Madden, the latter's hands clasped on his hat. Eve went along. Half a block farther they encountered Sheriff Bill Ribsam and his deputies.

"Prisoner for you, Ribsam," said Shelby. "Where've you been? Murder charge against Madden this time. He killed Garland earlier tonight. Tried to add me to his collection of notches. I'll go along while you lock him up."

Bill Ribsam made no objection. In a few minutes they turned in at the jail, the sheriff lifting a lamp from a wall bracket to light the way into the cell block. As Madden walked into a cell, Grat saw him exchange a meaning look with the sheriff. The cell door clanged.

"Open another cell!" Grat swung his Colt on Ribsam. "Don't look cross-eyed. I know you aimed to turn him loose the minute I was out of here. I'll make sure Russ will be on hand for trial tomorrow."

Bill Ribsam protested. So did his deputies. But Grat and Eve both had sixes out; theirs were holstered. Before he locked them in the adjoining cell, Grat took their guns and the sheriff's keys. He and Eve left them hammering on the iron door. As the young lawyer secured the outer jail door and pocketed the keys, Judge Taney waddled up.

"What's all that noise in there?" demanded the judge. When Grat told him, Taney burst out, "You can't do that to the sheriff!"

"No?" said Shelby. "Well, they're all staying there till court opens in the morning. Be prepared to try Russ Madden for

Garland's murder, judge. Things are coming to a head in Broadaxe County."

Grat got no sleep that night. He saw to it that word of the Garland killing reached every cattleman before morning. Ranchers and stockhands began to arrive shortly after sunup. It was noon before the trial was under way. When Shelby released Madden and the three lawmen, the rustler, evidently worried that he was at the end of his rope, said to Grat:

"I'll make a dicker with you. Them whitefaces are still at my ranch. You can have 'em back, and I'll clear out of the county."

"No deal, Russ. I'll get the herd after you've been tried."

Sheriff Ribsam, on promise of good behavior, was allowed to take Madden to the prisoners' dock. Shelby observed ten or a dozen flint-eyed men, Madden's riders, occupying front seats in the courtroom. Mrs. Garland, arriving with Eve, carried a shotgun. The old lady placed a chair so that she was within pointblank range of the judge's bench. Taney, noticing her, was visibly perturbed. He beckoned to a deputy sheriff.

"Make that woman sit with the crowd and take her shotgun."

Mrs. Garland overheard him. "I'm settin' where I am, Taney, and if you don't pass sentence to hang Tal's murderer by the neck till dead, I'm lettin' daylight through you!"

Judge Taney had appointed a man from Phil Holcomb's office as Madden's attorney. Shelby represented the Garlands. The weasel-faced Holcomb opened the case for the prosecution with nervous glances at the grim-eyed cattlemen's jury. He seemed more at ease when he looked toward the gun-hung rustlers in the front row.

Grat knew that the county attorney expected these bad hats to break up the trial. He had worn his gun to court and kept an eye on the wolf-faced crew. Yates, one of the witnesses, was called to the stand. As he started to walk past the rustlers, a booted foot kicked him on the leg. The witness cast a sidelong look at the menacing group, turned to face Judge Taney and blurted:

"I guess I don't know nothin' about this case, Your Honor."

Taney grinned. "All right, go back to your seat. Call the next witness."

The cattleman, Anson, got no farther than Yates. As he was hesitating under the baleful eyes of Madden's stock thieves, Shelby stood up. "Your Honor, those men in the front row are intimidating the witnesses!" Without waiting for Taney's answer, Grat left the counsel table, strode toward the gang. He flipped out his six-shooter. "I'm inviting you gentlemen to leave!"

"We only take orders from the sheriff!" growled one.

Just then somebody yelled, "Look out, Madden's loose and got a gun!"

Shelby started to turn his head, checked the movement. But in the split second his gaze was averted from the rustlers on the left, one bounced from his chair. A hard fist struck the lawyer behind the ear. He folded, dimly conscious of a voice shouting:

"C'mon, Russ, they dassn't pitch lead in this mob!"

ALL the rustlers had leaped up, fisting sixes. Madden, no longer handcuffed, clutching one of the sheriff's .45's, lunged from the prisoners' dock. Ribsam and his deputies came tight at his heels, menacing the crowd with death tubes. Judge Taney shot a look at Mrs. Garland, saw that she wasn't watching him in the sudden confusion. He slid down behind his bench, reappeared on all fours, wearing his hat. His right hand clasped a Colt. As he crawled after Madden and the lawmen, Mrs. Garland spied him.

"Where you headin', Taney?" she screeched. "Get back on that bench!"

With an oath, he rose on his knees and fired. The bullet skimmed the sombrero from her head. The courtroom was shaken by the roar of her shotgun. Amos Taney, renegade jurist, flopped on his face.

The shotgun blast helped to rouse Shelby. He pushed upward on his hands. Madden and the badge-toters had cleared the wooden railing in front of the judge's bench. Grat swept up the gun he had

dropped when the rustler hit him. Madden, making for the lane opened in the terrified crowd by his rustler mates, caught the movement.

Grat triggered as Madden's pistol slanted down. The cow thief's weapon flamed, but he was falling, his face twisted in agony. His bullet tore into the floor an inch from the hand that supported Grat as he swung Colt on Sheriff Bill Ribsam. The lawman got one shot across, nicking Grat's ear, before a lead chunk swept him off his feet.

Ribsam's deputies had sunk to their heels, guns drumming. One sprawled backward as a bullet smashed through his half-open mouth. Grat's shoulder swayed with the shock of lead pitched at him by the other deputy. It threw his aim off as he squeezed trigger. But Mrs. Garland let go with her second barrel at that instant. Riddled, the deputy went down sideways.

Madden's waddies, working toward the door when Shelby stopped their chief's getaway, were heading out on the run. It was, they realized, every man for himself now. The jury box had emptied of twelve furious cowmen as the last deputy fell. Grat, with reloaded Colt, was in the forefront of the party that charged across the courtroom, hurling chairs aside in their haste to reach the escaping cow thieves. The latter were mounting at the hitchrack when the cowmen erupted from the doorway.

Gun lightning streaked back and forth, men toppled from saddles, horses reared and bucked away. Some of the smoke-fogged figures backed against the courthouse wall slid down in death-stricken attitudes. But Grat Shelby, fighting lawyer, was one of those still upright when the smoky melody ended on a single crashing note.

Grat holstered his gun. "Gentlemen," he said to the surviving cowmen, "you should have done this long ago. Your judge and your sheriff, seeing how it would end, tried to flee while they could. Law and order have come to stay."

He straightened his tie, strode into the courthouse. Eve was trying to comfort her mother, who had given way to her feelings now that it was over. The girl, too, was sobbing.

"If Tal was only here to see the finish of these owlhooters!" wailed Mrs. Garland.

"It may be small comfort, Mrs. Garland," Grat said gently, "but his death made it certain. Shall I get the carriage and drive you home?"

"Please, Grat." Eve's eyes glistened with tears as she looked at him. But there was something besides sorrow in her expression, the look a woman gives to the man she loves. And Grat Shelby, as he turned away to seek the Garland carriage, knew that Eve was going to share a bright future with him on that once thief-ridden range.

Longhorns for a Sky Pilot

By C. W. Chamberlain

A true anecdote from the rip-roaring frontier days

"WILL YOU kindly permit a preacher to hold divine services in your liquor emporium, Mr. Thayer?" a deep voice spoke up.

"What's that? What's that?" Doc Thayer, one of the proprietors of the Gold Rooms Saloon, asked, hardly believing his ears.

Newton, Kansas, cowtown extraordinary, had twenty-seven liquor places in 1871. The outstanding saloon was the famed Gold Rooms, owned by Thayer and Bill Price. The latter, a former miner and rancher, had given it the name. Both partners prided themselves on running the most imposing bar in the cattle country. Six gaming tables, music, and vaudeville, provided entertainment in the glittering interior, although the outside was rough, unpainted boards.

It was early evening one Sunday in September, when a dust-covered stranger entered the doors and approached Thayer, who looked and dressed the part of a polished gentleman. The pilgrim was tired and thirsty, but he looked askance at the mammoth bar, lined with cowmen and cattle buyers.

The stranger evidently had come a long way to this godless cowtown where there was no church or religious organization.

To a close observer, the predatory look in this stranger's eyes and the thin-lipped mouth of his deadpan countenance belied the ministerial clothing—a long, greenish-black frock coat, grimy high collar and black, string tie. The flat-crowned hat, however, assured Doc Thayer of the ecclesiastical intent.

The stranger's eyes shifted to the uproar about him. The games were going full blast, crowds were thronging the tables, and discordant voices rose in raucous and harsh profanity. The fiddlers were trying to make more noise than the crowd. The melodeon was bellowing and roaring, while a team of buck-and-wing dancers were pounding and rattling the boards of an improvised stage at the end of the immense room. The sky pilot's eyes came back to Doc Thayer.

"I understand that you offered your saloon for divine services last summer," the preacher said in a tired voice. "I'm Reverend Tillingate. I'd like to conduct service tonight, with your permission."

"Well, Reverend, last July a sky pilot from Emporia by the name of Overstreet arranged to preach here but a heavy gully-washer prevented attendance. It might bring some business to the saloon. What time do you want to start the services?"

"At eight o'clock, please. I'll be glad to announce it from yonder platform, if I may."

"By all means, Reverend. I'll quiet the racket and introduce you. Glad to have you with us."

Shoving the buck-and-wing dancers off the rickety stage, Doc Thayer pounded on a table with the barrel of his six-gun.

"Quiet, everybody!" he shouted above the din. "Bill, shut down that melodeon for a minute! You fellers with the fiddles, cut out that infernal caterwauling and let everybody give me their attention!"

Comparative quiet reigned as the preacher was introduced and gave his announcement.

When the black-clad figure stepped down from the platform a round of applause and wild whoops followed him. A cowhand grabbed the reverend by the arm and hustled him protesting over to the bar.

"Have a drink, old-timer! You look hot and thirsty."

"I never indulge, my friend," the sky pilot said, licking his dry lips.

PHILADELPHIA BOB, a bartender who once had mixed drinks for silk-hatted customers before he had been obliged to hightail it west, was just finishing the preparation of a milk concoction with a double slug of gin for a lunger from Kansas City. He had an inspiration.

Setting the mixture before the sky pilot, he announced, "A nice, cold glass of milk from a Texas longhorn, Reverend. It's on the house."

Reverend Tillingate looked at the innocent-appearing drink and licked his lips.

"Sure. Go ahead, old-timer," the cowhand urged. "It's just good old cow's milk."

The reverend looked uncertain for a moment, then reached suspiciously for the white fluid.

He sampled it and an unholy light gleamed in his eyes. He took another sip. His thin-lipped mouth widened into a slit that nearly cut his face in two. Then he swallowed the drink in one long, lingering gulp.

He sat the empty glass back on the bar, smacked his lips, and breathed a deep sigh as he rolled his reptilian eyes upward.

"Heavens!" he said fervently. "What a cow!"

Doc Thayer, in introducing the preacher, had slipped in a brief commercial announcement that included the promise of a horse race and a badger fight, immediately following the religious services. Before dark the news had spread throughout town and to the cow camps beyond its borders.

The congregation was on hand a half hour before the sky pilot appeared. He dry-rubbed his hands together, as he looked over the throng of cowhands, gamblers, and townspeople who had come to hear him.

The services began with a long drawn out prayer that, before it was ended, drove several impatient worshipers to the bar to wet their whistles. A waddy was gambling in a distant corner and had lost his last dollar. Just as the prayer drew to a close, he threw down his cards and ripped out a healthy curse that coincided with the "Amen" from the platform.

The entire congregation howled with relief and enjoyment. Then a local cut-up released the dogs, waiting for their battle with the badgers. It was several moments before the uproar died down so that the services could be resumed.

One of the entertainers played some hymns on the melodeon. The congregation shook the rafters with their singing. This was followed by a sermon in which the sky pilot promised them, one and all, fire and brimstone in the hereafter.

"My misdirected brethren," the speaker concluded unctuously, "Hell is filled with fighting, faro, hard liquor, and painted women!"

"Oh, death, where is thy sting?" a voice in the back of the room shouted.

Disregarding the ribald laughter, the preacher asked two cowboys to take up the collection. The good-natured crowd contributed liberally. The preacher concluded the service with a prayer for the lost souls in Newton. Then the congregation dispersed to watch the horse race.

THE sky pilot pocketed the collection and lingered uncertainly at the now deserted bar. Philadelphia Bob was polishing the mahogany.

"Do you—er—er—my brother, do you have any more of that Texas longhorn milk?" the minister asked wistfully.

"Sure thing, parson," Bob said. He slyly mixed the drink below the bar out of the preacher's eyesight.

One glass of "milk" followed another as the bartender concealed his grin under his heavy mustache. This was going to be something to tell when the boys returned for the badger fight.

The preacher had finished his eighth glass of "longhorn" when he began to show signs of wear and tear. Bob was

marveling at the sky pilot's capacity when suddenly the good man's knees buckled under him and he fell to the floor.

With the help of one of the gamblers, the bartender carried the unconscious man into a back room where they laid him on a bunk. As Reverend Tillingate turned over with tremendous snores, a wallet and a pack of playing cards fell from an inner coat pocket. The gambler picked up the cards, saw they were marked, and swore lustily. The bartender examined the contents of the wallet and became equally profane.

"Your preacher friend is Chicago George, the card-sharper," Bob told Doc Thayer when he returned to superintend the badger fight. "They ran him out of Abilene and he was dead broke when he got here. What'll we do? Turn him over to the boys for pullin' this ringer?"

"Hell, no," Thayer replied. "When he sobers up, give him a quart of rye and tell him to get the hell out of town. I don't want nobody to know. He was good entertainment and worth what he collected. And I'm enough of a Christian to give the Devil his due."

Powdersmoke Prophecy

By Walker A. Tompkins

(Continued from page 39)

Blood leaked from the bullet hole between the gambler's eyes. His knees buckled and he dropped like a hewn tree, pulling trigger a second time before he sprawled inert on the sage-dotted hillside.

Madame Zira's powdersmoke prophecy had been fulfilled.

THE east-bound train was shunting out on the main line of the Union Pacific when Del Rand emerged from a sod hut flaunting a sign, *M.D. Gunshot Wounds a Specialty.*

A fresh shirt from the warsack Rand had left at the U. P. station hid the bandage which the frontier medico had plastered over his shoulder.

It was still six minutes to midnight, when the Frontier Express was due to pull out for Omaha.

The cowboy from Texas paused at the platform of his coach, staring across the thronged street to where Madame Zira's red-striped tent was pitched between a Chinese restaurant and a dance hall.

The gypsy girl was reading the Line of Venus on the palm of a burly rail-spiker when the cowboy pushed into her tent.

The Irish paddy scowled at the interruption, as the Texan dropped a gold ring on the plush beside Madame Zira's crystal ball. It was a ring fashioned into a coiled dragon, with the initial "Z" set on the gold with tiny pearls.

"A keepsake," Del Rand said, "from him."

Out of the night the locomotive of the Frontier Express wailed its urgent warning whistle.

Quick Trigger Dude

By Al Storm

That fancy-dressed hombre had Steve Prentiss buffaloed. And when he framed the young cowpoke for a stage holdup, Colt-clever Steve had to try to gun-match a demon in dude's clothing.

HE CAME rocketing down the long slope of Debus Mountain screeching like a crazy Comanche, dodging boulders, eluding knife-tipped cactus, riding wild and reckless and having himself one hell of a good time. The thick ochre dust was already settling over the road as he breasted the thickets and turned after the fast-running stage. But Texas, the little bay mare, was fleet and young Steve Prentiss tingled with reckless exuberance, half drunk with a physical glory of being young and healthy and high spirited as a rutting stag.

A woman passenger leaned closer to the Wells, Fargo coach window as Prentiss rode up, her blue eyes slitted against the rush of wind and boiling road grit. Prentiss grinned at her and she smiled, teeth flashing white in the tan oval of her face. The man sitting across from her scowled. He was a swarthy, handsome rake, hard of feature, black of eye, with a pink feather of scar tissue that raked one eyebrow upward into a sardonic arch.

Then the shotgun guard saw Prentiss and jerked half around, raising his rifle. Wind splayed the guard's black beard up into his face as he shouted at the driver, and Prentiss laughed. The whip cast

anxious over-shoulder glances at the laughing, wild riding young waddy.

"I'm a curly wolf from the mesquite brakes o' hell!" Prentiss yowled. "Toss down your jewels or I'll spit and knock this rollin' teacup off the road! Yippee! Let 'er go, Gallagher!"

THE WHIP shot one swift glance at the guard and began fighting the brake lever and sawing at the ribbons. The guard shoved both hands skyward, struggling half erect so that his rifle slipped from his lap and fell over the dashboard.

"Don't shoot, Spence—" the guard yelled. "Don't—"

Prentiss' jaw slackened as he stared at the pleading black-whiskered guard. Then he grinned. "Hell, keep 'er rolling. I ain't no ordinary, low-down holdup . . ." To show the innocence of his intentions, Prentiss reined in slightly and reached for the makings in his shirt pocket.

But at the first move of his hand toward his shirt the shotgun guard screeched hoarsely and dropped to his knees. Still screeching, the guard heaved and strained, and an iron-bound strongbox was thrown over the side and nearly under Texas' drumming hoofs. The little bay shied violently, nearly throwing Prentiss from the saddle.

In that same feverish split second, the edge of his eye caught a blur of motion from the stage window, and a six-gun blared in his face. Fire whipped a fine thread of pain across his throat. Then the stage was yards up the road, hidden in the dust storm of its own making. Twice more the smashing report of the six-gun came from the stage, but the dust was billowing thick as greasewood smoke and the slugs went whistling wild.

Slack-jawed with bewilderment, Prentiss stared after the fleeing Wells, Fargo coach. His glance fell upon the iron-bound box lying at the edge of the road; and a hot flush of embarrassment surged up from his neckerchief. He peered furtively at the granite crags and brush-choked coulees to see how many had witnessed and were laughing at this latest bit of Prentiss' foolishness. His throat burned and his fingers came away red when he touched the bullet crease.

Of all the crazy, quarter-witted galoots—shooting at a man just because he happened to be feeling foxy and wanted to race the stage! Half dazed, half scared by the thing that had happened he stared accusingly at the strongbox.

With an impatient flirt of the reins, Prentiss wheeled and started away. Then he stopped. Hell, he couldn't just leave the strongbox in the road. Somebody might come along and steal it. Slowly he retraced his steps. Wearily he dismounted and after sweating and cussing himself blue finally hoisted the box across his saddle.

He'd tote the damned thing to Apache Ford. He'd turn it over to the sheriff. And then, by jeepers, he'd find him a black-whiskered shotgun guard and tell him what was what—shoving iron boxes under a man's running horse!

But Steve Prentiss hadn't gone half a mile before he was plagued by newer and fresher worries. Sure as blazes that pair on the stage would report to the law that they'd been held up. Posses would be out primed for bear. And a man totin' a strongbox across his saddle horn would be askin' for a mixture of hot lead and misery.

NIGHT was sooty blue when Steve Prentiss finally drifted into Apache Ford from the north. He walked the mare in slowly, dragged low in his saddle by the impact of a thousand searching, condemning eyes seeking him out, shriveled by the weight of the thousand hungry guns that seemed trained on his back.

Every nerve screamed with tension as he fought the mad impulse to glance back over his shoulder. His shirt darkened with perspiration, and his lips moved soundlessly as he cursed the panicky shotgun guard who had made of him a wanted man.

A pair of smoky lanterns set on posts showed front to the livery barn, and Prentiss turned in, eager for the moment's respite to be found in the dark of the huge barn.

". . . lot of guts, man," someone was saying in the front office. "Charlie wouldn't 'a' had a chance with that Winchester and he knowed it. Why, Spence would've gut-shot him afore he knowed it."

"Yeah," another voice cut in. "Nobody but Spence would've had the guts to ride up alongside thataway—and not even drawed his cutter, neither."

"Drawed, hell! Spence'd had that cutter from under his arm afore old Charlie'd had time to spit if'n Charlie hadn't throwed down that strongbox. It's funny he never anyhow. Ain't like Spence to let a feller alive. He's the killin'est coyote I ever heard tell of."

Steve Prentiss eased past the door and led Texas into an empty stall. He slipped that bridle off the mare and hung it on the saddle horn. Then he paused for a moment, fumbling for a smoke, debating whether to brazen it out or to sneak down to the sheriff's office.

The door to the livery office was open when Prentiss started back toward the street. A broad wedge of light stretched across the aisle, and he knew that the speakers had heard him and were waiting. Casually he stepped to the door.

"Put a bay mare down there," he said, jerking his head toward the stalls. "How's about a hatful of oats?"

One old coot pulled himself to his feet and picked up a tin bucket. The other two oldsters eyed Prentiss searchingly. Their glances slid away abruptly, cold-filmed with hatred and jumpy with fear. And Prentiss remembered the bullet mark on his throat. He reached up and twisted his neckerchief to cover the brand.

"You was talkin' about a stage holdup?" Prentiss said quietly. "When'd it happen?"

NEITHER man answered, and Prentiss felt the bullet crease in his throat start smarting again. He was in a spot for fair. He couldn't stay in the livery barn all night. The minute he left, the oldsters would spread word through Apache Ford that a bullet-nicked stranger had arrived. And from what Prentiss had overheard, Spence was a murder-made killer Apache Ford would be all too anxious to get under their guns. Questions asked later.

"There are some boys here in town who'll be looking for me," Prentiss said carefully, feeling his way into a dangerous ruse which might or might not work. "If anybody wants to see . . . well, show them my bay mare, they'll know that I'm in town."

The veiled reference to a gang locked the room with cold uncertainty, and Prentiss left. The oldsters would be afraid to talk until they had mulled over the warning in his words. Or if they did talk, the guns would hold off until Apache Ford saw a chance to clean up the whole gang—maybe. Either way, it was a slim chance, but it offered a few hours of time.

Talk was riffling the town like a stiff breeze, talk of a gun-swift killer named Spence and a stage holdup at Debus Mountain. Steve Prentiss listened carefully behind half-closed eyes. The stage pair had reported the holdup, as he had expected, painting it wild to excuse their own lack of courage. Then they had headed on west toward Plummet. Prentiss stretched lazily.

With the stage headed on west, and with everybody blaming Spence for the holdup, there wasn't too much danger of a young waddy named Steve Prentiss getting back-shot for a stage bandit. Not if he kept out of sight, and if those oldsters at the livery barn didn't squawk.

Deciding suddenly that he was hungry, Prentiss went down the street to the Queen City Eats. He gave his order and stretched, feeling glad and relaxed, even content to loaf and wait for the sheriff to come in from scouring the mountains.

Prentiss grinned at himself in the mirror that hung over the counter and then let his gaze search the room. His breath bunched suddenly and he felt a cold sweat drip along his spine. The lady passenger and the scarred, dark-faced dude were watching him from a corner table. He spun about quickly, and the woman's mouth opened to cry out.

A quick word from the dude stopped the outcry, but her face was strained and set with controlled emotion as Steve Pren-

tiss met her gaze. The dude was slouched back, his chair pushed well away from the table where a partially filled plate made obvious that he had been eating. His black broadcloth coat was open, and Prentiss noticed the flat bulge of a shoulder-holstered gun under his left arm. Nor was the dude at all frightened, his gaze spearing into Prentiss' eyes with cold, penetrating amusement.

STEVE PRENTISS approached and drew up a chair unbidden, his attention fixed steadily upon the gun-toting dude. The woman gasped and stood up.

"Wait a minute, Wanda," the dude said. Then he looked at Prentiss again with that chill, penetrating scrutiny. "You got a lot of damned cold nerve cowboy."

The woman started away, and the dude reached out swiftly to grab her by the wrist. She wheeled, pale and angry, and Prentiss thought for the moment that she was going to claw the dude. The dude dropped her wrist.

"Ma'am," Prentiss said quickly, "I ain't no damned—uh, sorry—but I ain't no stage holdup. I was just funnin' and racing my Texas horse along after that stage when they like to tripped us up by throwin' off that strongbox. I don't want it and as soon as I can I'm giving it back."

Her lips curled with biting scorn. "Likely story. Next I suppose you'll expect me to believe that you brought it into Apache Ford with you."

Prentiss flushed. "No'm, but I got it cached out in the hills. Soon as the sheriff gets back, I'm going to tell him where it is."

The woman snorted, but her eyes were less frigid. The dude nodded slightly.

"Sounds reasonable," he said. "And bringing back the strongbox will prove it."

The waitress brought Prentiss' meal, and the dude directed her to set it at their table. Prentiss felt a lightning relief throb through him. As soon as the waitress had withdrawn, he retold his story, simply, earnestly, striving to convince the woman that he had been having fun, nothing more.

Her name was Wanda Barret, he learned, a schoolteacher from Indiana. The man, also a traveler, was called Hiram Carter. And they had met only after boarding the stage at Silver City.

"But we are old friends by now," Carter smirked; and the woman's face tightened with dislike, but she said nothing.

Prentiss watched the little byplay covertly, a tiny thread of dislike for Carter making itself felt. He caught the woman's eye and grinned and her answering smile was warm and friendly.

As though sensing the alignment against him, Hiram Carter began a deft reprobing of Prentiss' story, growing doubt and ridicule unmasking a pointed accusation. Prentiss refused flatly to say anything more about where he had cached the strongbox, and a tension began to mount between them.

Finally Wanda Barret said tartly, "Why don't you go see for yourself, Mr. Carter, if you don't believe?" But beneath the crisp flurry of words, Prentiss caught the gnawing edge of reborn doubt.

"There are a dozen caves in that region where he says he cached the box," Hiram Carter retorted. "I'd be looking all night."

Steve Prentiss raised his head. "I thought you was a stranger hereabouts, Carter."

But Hiram Carter remained steel-cold. "I asked about this region," he said. "I even inquired where you would be most likely to hole up if the posse got too close on your heels."

IT WAS a challenge, open and ruthless, and Steve Prentiss studied the hard features of Hiram Carter with wary interest. It was strange that a dude would pack a well worn gun such as showed momentarily when his coat slipped open. And it was likewise strange that he would so boldly face a gunswift killer as he was facing Prentiss—unless he knew that Steve Prentiss was not Spence! To know that, he would have to know Spence!

But Prentiss was given no time to consider this new angle. Carter was edging for trouble, goading the waddy with his smirking insolence, holding his right hand

inches close to the buttonless gap in his coat.

"But this is all so silly," Wanda Barret put in nervously, fighting to stave off the impending violence that was stiffening the air. "Two grown men riding a stage and getting panicky just because a—"

"They expected to be murdered in cold blood," Hiram Carter said. "They knew this killer's rep and they expected to be shot down without warning or reason. That's the way Spence works—he victimizes man, woman, or child, leaving nobody to talk."

"And you're not afraid of that rep, eh?" Prentiss snarled suddenly, his anger rising hot and swift.

But such bloody savagery was beyond the woman's comprehension. She nodded vaguely in half understanding, and then she rose, sensing the trouble building up about her.

"Really—" she said.

Steve Prentiss rose too, hat in hand. But Hiram Carter was already on his feet. He caught one of Wanda Barret's arms and slipped it under his own, his sardonic mocking eyes never leaving Prentiss' face.

"Good night, cowboy," he said softly.

Wanda Barret struggled quietly for a moment, then subsided before Carter's superior strength. Her eyes sought Prentiss' with fear and shame darkening their blue, and Prentiss saw that while she half feared Carter, she was more ashamed to make a public spectacle of herself by struggling.

Carter was watching him, his left arm clamped tight against the woman's arm, his right held slightly higher than his belt and ready to flash toward that shoulder gun. But Steve Prentiss was beyond fearing the unknown experience of the dude as a gunman.

He stepped forward slightly and grabbed Carter's free arm, jerking and twisting with one quick heave. Carter cursed and gave at the knees to save his elbow from dislocating. Prentiss released the arm and stepped in, his fist mashing Carter's thin lips and driving the dude back and down.

But Carter rolled, fast and lithe, and came to his knees with the shoulder gun in his hand and centered on Prentiss' chest. Prentiss felt his own revolver butt slap his palm, but he knew that he would never hoist the gun clear in time. Then Carter had dropped his gun and was fawning and begging.

"Don't shoot, Spence," he pleaded. "Don't murder me! Don't!"

It was so unexpected that Prentiss stood frozen for the moment, disgust and anger mingling with wonderment on his face. Mistaking the play of expression for something more violent, Wanda Barret stepped between the men, her eyes searching Prentiss' face. Behind her, Hiram Carter was grinning a mirthless, triumphant grin as she said, "Don't kill him. Please, don't—"

Prentiss turned away angrily. Don't kill him—just as though he had been going to. Just as though. . .

ONLY after he had taken a room at the hotel and stretched out on the ratty comforter did Steve Prentiss lose the stiff-necked anger that gripped him. He lighted a smoke and looked about the bleak little frontier room, thoughts reverting again and again to the spectacle of Hiram Carter begging for mercy, to Wanda Barret asking him not to kill. He was foolish to let her belief in his innocence mean so much to him, he knew. But the very thought of her was warming and comforting and he let his fancy build daydreams.

A gun blatted once, violently, somewhere down the street. A dog took up its shrill racketing. Then it was quiet again. Prentiss yawned. Several horses were moving along the street below, he could tell from the sound. He tossed his cigarette stub out the wide open window and walked over to blow out the light. A knock sounded at the door, but before he had time to more than swing around, the door opened and two men crowded in.

"No noise, bub," one scraggly-whiskered tough muttered, wagging his six-gun. "One cheep and it's your brisket."

The other, a lean, leather-jawed towhead moved over and slid Prentiss' gun from its holster, shoving the gun under

his belt. He picked up Prentiss' hat and held it out.

"Let's go, ranny. Blacky's already done for one old coot tonight as wouldn't act smart. Don't rear up and paw now or he's liable to make it two."

It didn't take a second glance to show Prentiss that these weren't lawmen brought by the livery barn oldsters' talking. He slapped the John B. on his head and moved toward the door.

"You first, Red," the black-whiskered tough growled. "In case he gets in a hurry and wants to run for it."

With Blacky holding a gun in his back, and with Red leading the way, they moved out of the room and down the narrow hallway. Just before they reached the stairway, Red held up his hand in quiet warning. Prentiss stopped. He started to say something, but Blacky's gun gouged his back and Prentiss fell silent. Then Red started across the head of the stairs making for the door leading to the outside stairs that led upward from the alley.

Blacky shoved Prentiss into motion, and as Prentiss moved he heard a faint gasp. A quick glance over his shoulder showed Wanda Barret staring wide eyed, shocked and hurt. Beside her stood Hiram Carter, a mocking triumphant light nasty in his narrowed black orbs. Then Carter was pushing forward.

"What's going on here?" he asked. "You promised Miss Barret, cowboy, that you'd—"

Red came back up the hall, moving fast and quiet. He shoved a gun into Carter's face. "We're taking Spence outa town. And we'll kill you both if you make a sound."

Wanda Barret whitened. Carter blustered and fumed but stood helpless under the threatening gun.

"I'm—" Prentiss started to say, but a savage jab of the gun in his back shut off the words before they could be uttered. Then a quick shove sent him on up the hall and out the door leading to the stairway and the night.

HORSES were waiting in the alley, and Steve Prentiss saw his own Texas mare. He slowed his pace, stalling desperately, waiting for Hiram Carter to sound an alarm. But the hotel was quiet and dark as they mounted; no sound came from the livery barn. Red looped rawhide about Prentiss' wrists and snugged them tight against the saddle horn.

With one outlaw on each side, they moved along the alley at a slow trot. Once clear of town they cut across a greasewood flat and headed toward a high shoulder of bare granite that loomed like a white sail on the shifting black-gray sea of shadow.

"Why did you call me Spence?" Prentiss wanted to know. "I ain't Spence and you know it."

The black-whiskered outlaw chuckled. "Reckon we do, bub. But that young lady don't, and I reckon Spence wants a little free time with her afore she finds out."

The words soaked slowly into Prentiss' reckoning, stirring a flood of burning rage. "And I suppose those old men at the livery barn think I'm Spence too!" he snarled. But Blacky growled in his beard without answering.

Red grinned. "They ain't thinkin' nothin' now. Like I told you, Blacky is quick thataway."

The calloused humor of the leathery-jawed outlaw quieted Prentiss. And chilled him. They sat their horses beneath the white cliff, waiting, glumly silent. After several cigarettes, a horse was heard racing toward them. And then Hiram Carter rode up, his handsome swarthy face mocking in the moonlight as he met Prentiss' furious glare.

"Let's find that strongbox," Carter said. "You can ride free, Prentiss, as long as you stay clear of Wanda Barret. Me and the boys will take the box back to Apache Ford and turn it over to the sheriff."

"Spence wouldn't turn nothing over to the sheriff." Prentiss said savagely.

Carter stiffened. Then he leaned out and drove his fist into Prentiss' mouth. Prentiss' head reeled and but for his roped hands he would have fallen. The taste of blood was sour-warm in his mouth.

After that they mumbled for a while

and then rode swiftly into the ragged hills. Red came up to stay close beside Prentiss while Spence and Blacky rode in the rear. Once their voices rose loud in argument. " . . . not yet, Blacky. There are a dozen caves around there. No sense in taking time to . . ." The voices fell lower, but Prentiss knew what was in store. Red looked over at him, grinning mirthlessly.

THE RAWHIDE binding his wrists to the saddle horn tore at his skin as he wrestled and worked, but they did not give a fraction of an inch. Time slipped inexorably past and they wound deeper into the rocky badlands. Then they were riding along the sloping wall of a deep canyon, the night far and thin overhead.

"Well, Prentiss," Carter said, "it's around here somewhere. Where's that cave?"

"Go to hell!"

Something hit at the base of his skull, and the night exploded into a fiery mass of shooting pain. Prentiss fought to hang onto his senses. Resistance would gain him little but a merciless beating, he saw. And sooner or later they would torture the secret from him. Even if they didn't, it wouldn't take too long for them to search the dozen or so shallow caves that honeycombed the canyon slope.

"It's on up a piece," Prentiss groaned. "I'll show you when we come to it."

In less than a quarter of a mile the canyon made an abrupt turn. Brush filled the sandy wash from wall to wall. Muscles stiffened with expectation, Prentiss called out. Now it would come. But Spence was suspicious, wary of being misled.

"You go with him, Red," he directed. "Let Prentiss carry it out where we can be sure we got it."

Prentiss' hands were untied and he was allowed to swing down. He stood rubbing his sore wrists. Spence saw the blood and torn skin and he grinned. Then Red prodded Prentiss in the back with his six-gun and they clamored up the slope. The cave was small. As they entered, Prentiss saw that he had no chance of darting ahead and eluding Red in abysmal darkness. There were no loose rocks to be snatched up for weapons. This was the end of the trail for fair. They moved slowly back into the darkness . . . eight, twelve, fifteen feet. Prentiss stumbled and fell, cursing aloud. Red leaped back cautiously.

"Strike a match, Prentiss," the outlaw ordered in a husky voice. "Strike it, you blamed fool! Or I'll start blasting!"

"I think I broke my ankle," Prentiss moaned. "I can't stand up. I—"

"Strike a light, you damned fool! You want to get blasted in here!"

Prentiss fumbled for a match and scraped it against the rock. The flame leaped up to show him prostrate on the floor. Red eyed him warily, then flicked his glance across the tiny wigwam of lighted space. He saw the iron-bound box shoved against the far edge of the cave, and a greedy hunger showed in his eyes.

"Strike another one, Prentiss," Red ordered.

Prentiss lit another match, and by the feeble light Red sidled around the waddy and hefted the box into his arms. He turned toward Prentiss awkwardly, the six-gun jutting. Prentiss pinched out the match, rolling quickly toward the outlaw. Flame thundered twice in the tiny cave, bucking and roaring with concussion.

HALF STUNNED by the noise and sweep of the shots, Prentiss lay still for a second, then got to his feet and lunged through the darkness at the outlaw. But red was scrambling for the moonlit opening. He heard Prentiss scuff the stone, and he began an awkward shambling run, burdened by the heavy box.

"Prentiss," he warned, "you stay back—"

Then Red was out into dim moonlight. A six-gun blared a yard-long ribbon of flame. A second flame cut in from the other side, and Red dropped the iron box, staggering back under a chopping hail of crossfire lead. Then his legs buckled and he sagged, riddled. Both bushwhack guns fired again into the limp huddle of body there in the cave entrance.

"Come on out, Red," Hiram Carter's voice said. "We bushed the coyote for fair."

Steve Prentiss had dropped flat at the first flash of gunfire. Now he inched carefully toward the dead outlaw at the cave mouth, feeling for a gun.

"Come on, Red! Hey, Red!" Carter's voice grew shrill and sharp with suspicion. "Hold up, Blacky. There's something haywire."

The black-whiskered outlaw stopped, his body a dark shadowy bulk against the brush to the left. Prentiss waited, hoping for sight of Carter. But Carter was wary, staying in cover. Then Blacky started moving back. Aiming carefully, Prentiss fired.

Almost on the second with his shot, a bullet slammed into the body of the dead outlaw behind which Prentiss was lying. Rolling once, Prentiss snapped a quick return slug at the muzzle flash. Blacky was down, but Hiram Carter—Spence—was still alive.

It was quiet then, and in that deathly hush Prentiss became aware of a pulsation, a dull throbbing sound. The sound built up then, louder, and he recognized the beat of running horses. Carter, too, must have caught the sound, for he was suddenly in the open, two guns dancing and bucking as he sent lead screaming into the cave opening.

Prentiss hugged the rock. Burning pincers laid a sharp bite into his thigh. He felt a cold slice taken from the edge of his leg. But still he held his fire, waiting, hoping against hope that Carter would keep coming.

And Carter did. Ducking low, the dudish outlaw ran toward the strongbox, blazing twice long rolls of shots into the cave opening. Then he holstered his guns and was bent over the box, gambling that his sweeping hail of lead had scored and that only time stood between him and a getaway with the strongbox.

It was then that Red quivered and groaned. His eerily thin voice railed in the moonlight. "Spence—damned double-crossing—Spence—"

The dudish outlaw stiffened, and in that instant Steve Prentiss stepped out into the moonlight. "Reach, Spence—grab stars or a gun!"

Hiram Carter—Spence—raised his arms slowly. Then he twisted, jabbing outward with his right fist. A tiny derringer snapped fire. Prentiss shot twice. He stood still, watching the figure before him wilt slowly into the spreading dark of the canyon bottom. Spence was dead.

As he stood over the outlaw, Prentiss watched the horsemen racing toward him and he wondered which story Wanda Barret would believe. Red groaned again, still miraculously alive after being riddled with lead, and his straining whisper cursed his partners.

"Hurry, posse," Prentiss breathed aloud. "Hurry and get here while Red is still alive. He's one guy Wanda will believe."

And she did.

Where our reading and writing waddies get together with POWDER RIVER BILL

TO ALL you hard-readin' hombres who want to reap a raft of swell letters from pen pards near, far and everywhere, get your name in here to Powder River Bill's bunkhouse bulletin, pronto. Write all about your hobbies, the sports you cotton to most. There's a host of mighty friendly rannies just waitin' to swap snapshots and souvenirs and tall tales with you. So limber up your pens and pencils and round up a fine herd of interesting amigos.

Sports fans, get out your pens.

Dear Bill:

Just finished reading my first issue of WESTERN TRAILS and found it very interesting. All the stories were good, especially "Shoot-Out on the Catamount Trail," by D. B. Newton, "The Broken Hangrope," by W. L. Covert, and "If the Noose Fits . . . ," by Gunnison Steele.

I am wondering if I could get a letter printed in the *Stampede*. I think WESTERN TRAILS is tops. I would like some pen pals also. I like to write and receive letters, so come on, pals, drop me a line and enclose your picture.

I am seventeen years old, five feet, eleven inches tall, weigh 172 pounds, and have brown hair and eyes. My hobbies are collecting pictures of boys and girls. My favorite sports are football, baseball, polo, and hockey.

Come on, pals, drop me a line and let's get to know each other.

RUSSELL BEERS
P. O. Box 24
Mountaindale, Pa.

Fill his mailbox.

Dear Bill:

I have been reading WESTERN TRAILS for a long time and I must say I enjoy it very much. I hope you will publish my letter as I would like pen pals from everywhere.

I am a veteran twenty-one years old, with blue eyes, blond hair, five feet, ten inches tall, and weigh 155 pounds.

Would like to hear from everyone, and I promise to answer all letters.

JOHN M. COOK, JR.
Route 1
Como, Miss.

Get acquainted with this redhead.

Hi Bill!

I would have started with "Dear Bill," but noticed everyone else did so I'll be different. I hope you enjoy this letter which may bring me many pen pals.

I'm Carol Beane, Bill, and I'd like all the service men from everywhere who would like a cheery note to write, especially those in hospitals. Not that this will help much, but here is a little description of what I look like: I've red hair, and really no temper, brown eyes, and I'm twenty-two years old. For more details I'd gladly furnish my pic-

PARDNER PETE'S
Bunkhouse Bulletin

Pen Pards who would like an ink sketch of their snapshot send it to—

DAVID JEROME
539 Brompton Place
Chicago. Ill.

Pen Pards who would like cowboy songs write to

VICTOR MARKS
7127 S. Washtenau Avenue
Chicago. Ill.

Pen Pards who would like poetry written about their picture send it to—

CHARLES J. HERBERT, JR.
c/o Victor St. James
Whittemore, Michigan

—and—

STANLEY C. DeCAMP
c/o Gen'l Delivery, Galion, Ohio

ture. I enjoy dancing, skating, reading, and of course writing.

I'll help make a happy moment for everyone who writes—at least I'll try. Your *Stampede* helps everybody have a little fun.

Write, for you won't be wrong!

CAROL BEANE
521½ N. Dewey
Oklahoma City, Okla.

Drop a line to this six-footer.

Dear Bill:

I'm a young man of eighteen and very lonely. I like the "great outdoors." I enjoy horseback riding and playing the fiddle. I'm six feet tall, have black hair and brown eyes.

I will answer all letters. Won't someone please write to me?

TED FOX
1214 S. 13th
Pawhuska, Okla.

Bring some cheer to a lonely girl.

Dear Bill:

I like WESTERN TRAILS very much and I would love to join your pen pals as I'm a lonely country girl. Writing letters would help me pass the time on these long winter evenings ahead.

I am twenty-three years old, with blond hair and blue eyes. My favorite sports are fishing, hiking, and horseback riding.

Please write to me, everybody, and especially the lonely country boys and girls like me. I will do my best to answer all who write me.

NORMA SIMKINS
Cushman, Ore.

Stampede your letters his way.

Señor Bill:

Your WESTERN TRAILS magazine is my top favorite Western book. My favorite story in the February issue is "Blue Dirt Pays Off—In Red" by J. Edward Leithead. I have filled in this month's ballot and would like very much to crash the *Stampede* and start a letter stampede my way.

I'm fond of all sports, swimming being my favorite. I like to collect stories, jokes, and pictures of all types. I'm fond of string music and play a guitar, tenor banjo, and mandolin.

Come on, everybody, if you're interested in ripsnorting letters, start that mail stampede my way. Three cheers for W. T.!

R. J. GULINZZO
Box 4, East End Sta.
Baltimore 5, Md.

An' listen, folks, don't forget to send in your ballots. Here's the ballot. Just mark "1" — "2" — "3" — "4" — an' so on, in the order of your likin'.

Adios, amigos—till next time.

Tophand Author's Ballot

WESTERN TRAILS
67 West 44th Street. New York, N. Y.

L. H. HOLMES — *Gun-Shy Hero*	___
WILSON L. COVERT — *Owlhooters' Night to Howl*	___
RICHARD BRISTER — *Death Ride to Denver*	___
WALKER A. TOMPKINS — *Powdersmoke Prophecy*	___
J. EDWARD LEITHEAD — *One-Man Posse on the Warpath*	___
C. W. CHAMBERLAIN — *Longhorns for a Sky Pilot*	___
AL STORM — *Quick Trigger Dude*	___
WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER — *Grandstand Pistol Play*	___

Name .....
Address .....

For the protection of our readers, WESTERN TRAILS reserves the right to open all Pen Pard mail passing through our hands.

Everything went haywire for Bert Hammer on rodeo day. And instead of forking a four-legged chain of lightning, Bert was cooling his heels in the calaboose waiting for a chance to make a . . .

Grandstand Pistol Play

By Wayne D. Overholser

IT WAS rodeo day in South Valley, and Bert Hammer could have used the two hundred dollars top money in the bucking contest. But it wasn't the two hundred dollars that had brought him into town. He had to see Ann Parker, and for the first time in the year he had been engaged to her, he didn't want to see her.

There was a possibility that Bert was something of a fool, and he gave sour thought to that premise as he rode into town. When a pretty, eager-eyed girl like Ann was willing and ready to get married, and he made a special trip to town to tell her it couldn't be this fall as they had planned, he unquestionably was crazy.

Then Bert thought about the sheriff, Hap Jones, who had been nagging Ann

to marry him since she'd quit wearing pigtails. The short hair along the back of Bert's neck began to stand straight out, bristling with anger.

Bert rode through the traffic of South Valley's Main Street, nodded at men he knew and grinned when a buckaroo shouted, "You riding Midnight today, Bert?"

"Not today," Bert shouted back.

Bert lifted his Stetson to banker Frank Logan's wife and returned her greeting civilly enough. Then, turning left along the side street, he mentally cursed Frank Logan. If there was twelve hundred dollars top money up, he'd ride Midnight, but two hundred was exactly one thousand short.

Frank Logan lived mighty fat off other people's money. Mrs. Logan didn't have to worry about where the bacon and bean money was coming from. Well, there was one thing about it. Mrs. Bert Hammer wasn't going to skimp and jump sideways trying to figure out where the nickels were hiding.

No sir, he wasn't going to put that ring on Ann's finger till the mortgage on the Rafter H was paid off. A man had to have some pride. If he couldn't have a home that was out from under Frank Logan's fat shadow, he'd just keep on eating his own soggy biscuits.

Then Bert was dismounting in front of the Parker house, and Ann saw him. She ran down the path to the front gate, a leggy ardent girl who had a way of making everybody like her, Bert Hammer in particular.

"I knew you'd be in today." Ann threw her arms around him and kissed him. "You're going to ride Midnight, aren't you?"

BERT forgot a lot of things right then including the speech he'd thought up about putting the wedding off. He held her away from him and looked at her, the September sunlight falling sharply upon her. She was slim in his arms, and her eyes were blue and her mouth was wide and quick-smiling.

"You're losing weight," she accused. "You're working too hard. I don't want to marry a man who's worked himself to hide and bone."

"It's my cooking." He winked. "Lost two ducks last week. Fed 'em a panful of biscuits, and when they went swimming in Yellow Fork, they sank."

"I'll fix that," Ann promised. "Next month."

Bert swallowed. He couldn't tell her. He just naturally couldn't tell her. He mumbled, "That'll be fine," and gave himself a cussing. He had about as much backbone as a fishworm.

"You are going to ride Midnight, aren't you?" Ann asked.

Bert swallowed again. He didn't feel like riding anything, let alone a four-legged chain of lightning. "Hadn't figgered on it," he said. "I just came into town to see you and get some grub."

"Bert Hammer, you've got to ride that horse. You won top money last year and people are expecting it." A quick smile came to her lips. "I'm going to the rodeo with Hap. I knew you wouldn't care, and I want to see the way he looks when you ride Midnight. He said you were just lucky last year."

"You're going with Jones?" Bert rubbed a hand across his face, not believing this and yet being sure that was what he heard.

"You don't care, do you, Bert? You see, it's kind of a last-date affair with Hap. You know, before we're married."

"No, I don't care," Bert mumbled. "Don't care at all. You have a good time."

She slipped an arm through his and tried to pull him toward the house. "Come in. Dinner's almost ready."

But Bert stood firm. "I can't. Got some things to do downtown." This was the time he should tell her, but he couldn't. Not if she was going to the rodeo with Hap Jones. And he was sure going to ride that Midnight horse now, no matter what.

"You aren't mad because I'm going with Hap?" Ann demanded. "You aren't jealous, are you? Now look! If you think that when we're married—"

"No, I ain't jealous. Shucks, no. I've

just got some things to do. Maybe I'll see you at the dance."

"You're taking me to that dance, Mister." She kissed him again, lingeringly. "Don't think I'm going to stand for the other girls dancing with you. I know how it'll go. Just because you won top money two years in a row, they'll be after you like flies after honey."

When he rode away, Bert could still feel the pleasant pressure of her lips. Doggone it, he just couldn't tell her. She wouldn't understand. She'd say it was her job to help pay the mortgage off, and if he didn't want to marry her, there were plenty of other men who did. Like Hap Jones.

It was just that a man had to have some pride. Even outlaws had pride. Like the Loudermans. Bankers had pride. Why, Frank Logan would brag for an hour about his bank being as solid as Mt. Jefferson. Hap Jones had his own queer kind of pride. One of the few things about Jones a man could like. Funny Ann wanted to go to the rodeo with him. Probably just wanted a few dates before she got married next month. Only thing was she wasn't getting married. Not to Bert Hammer anyhow.

An idea hit Bert then. Not that it was much good, but when a man was in the corner Bert was, he'd try anything, good or not. Might be that underneath his fat shell, Frank Logan had a decent streak. Might be. Bert laughed out loud. Next thing he knew he'd be believing in fairies.

THE idea wasn't good. Bert saw that as soon as he got into Logan's office and started talking. The banker sat back in his swivel chair, hands folded over his shirt where his belly bulged too high for his vest to meet. His heavy eyelids were almost closed as he listened and Bert could see Logan wasn't liking what he heard.

"Me and Ann were figgering on getting married next month," Bert said, "but you know how it is when a man gets married. He wants to fix the place up and get squared around. I wanted to pay the mortgage off. I sure did, but the way beef prices are, I can't do it. This morning I got to thinking that maybe I was looking at it the wrong way. What I ought to have is a bigger mortgage, say twenty-five hundred. I'd like to buy some feeders. I've got lots of winter range."

Logan's eyes were still lidded. Maybe he wasn't even listening. It would be a fine thing to hit him in that fat belly. Right where the vest didn't come together.

Bert swallowed. He added, "Maybe I'd have enough left over to fix the house up. I'd like to build a nice bedroom for Ann before she comes up."

Logan's eyes snapped open. He said, "I'm not real sure about you, Bert. Hap Jones claims you're hand-in-glove with the Loudermans. Says you fed them and hid them out after they pulled off that job in Idaho. He said you'd be in today just to look things over."

"Why?" Jones would get off any kind of a lie if he thought it would kick back in Bert's face, but this thing of hooking him up with the Loudermans was too thin.

"Did you know I had thirty-two thousand dollars locked up in that safe right now?" Logan asked.

"No."

"Hap claims the Loudermans are hiding out along the Yellow Fork. Says he's cut sign on them, but can't run them down."

Bert rose, big fists clenched so that the knuckles were white. He said, "Let's have the rest of it."

"It just happens that I had to get in some extra cash to handle a ranch sale in the lower valley. With the rodeo prize money, it adds up to twice what I usually keep." He paused, eyes dropping to his desk as he opened a drawer and took out a cigar. "Thirty-two thousand would tempt the Loudermans."

"You ain't said it all," Bert prompted doggedly.

Logan slid the cigar into his mouth and clamped his molars upon it.

"All right. Hap says you're a lookout for the Loudermans. He said that if things looked right to you, you'd pass

the word along, and the Loudermans would tackle the bank today."

"You believe that?"

Logan took the cigar out of his mouth and stared at it thoughtfully. "I don't know, Bert. I know how you've been saving and skimping since you've been engaged to Ann. Your share of a bank robbery would fix you up."

Bert Hammer had never been one to hold his temper. Scars of other men's fists on his face attested to that. But he held his temper now. As long as he lived on Yellow Fork, he'd have to do business with Frank Logan.

"About stepping that mortgage up to twenty-five hundred?" Bert asked.

"I'll have to say no," Logan answered. "You're better off with a small mortgage. You can keep the interest paid. I know Ann. She won't mind pioneering with you until you get your outfit built up. Fine girl, Ann is."

Bert stared at Frank Logan. A fat toad! Rich! Self-satisfied! Powerful. It struck Bert it would be a good thing if Logan's bank was robbed. It would be a good thing if Logan was smashed and had to get out and work like other men.

BERT wheeled and strode out. Maybe Logan was right. If he'd ask Ann, she'd say exactly what Logan had said she would, that she wouldn't mind pioneering until the Rafter H was built up. Trouble was it'd be a hell of a job building it up. There'd be two of them to feed and hard to tell how many more after that. He just wasn't going to ask her. He knew how he wanted things and he knew what was right to expect from a woman.

Bert stood on the sidewalk and rolled a smoke, staring at the milling crowd, and seeing none of it. Hap Jones was smarter than Bert had pegged him. He wanted Ann. One way to get her was to kick Bert out of the running. But Hap Jones was going to get fooled. Bert wasn't going to get kicked out of the running.

That was when Hap Jones came along the walk with his burly deputy, Sam Roper, and forthwith Bert forgot his good intentions. Or if anything was needed to make him forget his intentions, it was Jones's coldly malicious words, "Well, Hammer, how do you like the idea of me taking your girl to the rodeo?"

Bert cuffed back his Stetson. "I'm glad you came along, Hap. I've been wanting to tell you what kind of a crawling critter I think you are. Alongside you a skunk is a sweet-smelling, upright animal."

Jones snickered. "It hurts 'cause I'm onto you, don't it?"

"You ain't onto nothing about me, but if I hear you saying anything more about me being hooked up with the Loudermans—"

"Sure gonna be hard on Ann when she finds out the kind of a crook she's engaged to," Jones jeered.

Jones's meaty lips held a constant grin. He was a big man, taller than Bert, and now frankly insolent of manner. Bert, meeting his mocking eyes squarely, kept thinking with half his mind that a man had to have some pride, and with the other half he was thinking that Jones was going out of his way to stir up trouble.

Jones's star gave him the whiphand. The last place Bert wanted to go was jail, and that was exactly where Jones would like to put him. He'd tell Logan he was keeping Bert from contacting the Loudermans, but what he really wanted was to keep Bert from riding Midnight.

The deputy, Sam Roper, chuckled sourly and spit into the dust. "Hell of a feller, this Hammer. Don't even have guts enough to say a word when another gent takes his best girl to the rodeo."

That did it. Bert didn't take time to think he was doing exactly what Jones wanted him to do. He didn't take time for anything. He lunged at the sheriff, both fists working in a steady battering rhythm. He got in a punch to Jones's nose. Sledged him with a right. Battered him back against the tie rail and brought a wicked upswinging left to his jaw. Then something exploded across his

head, and Bert fell forward full length, hands palm flat in the street dust.

Sam Roper holstered his Colt. Drunker'n hell," he explained to the crowd that had gathered. "A man'd have to be drunk to tackle the sheriff, now wouldn't ya?"

Bert woke up in jail, conscious of a headache and a biting sense of disappointment. He wanted to ride Midnight, partly for the two hundred, but mostly because he wanted to give Ann something to brag about to Hap Jones.

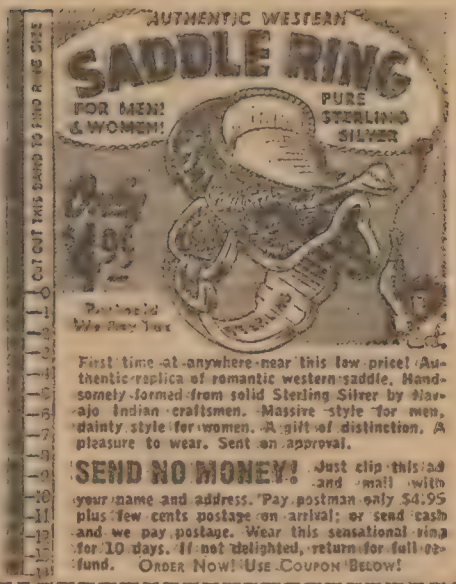
He looked at his watch. It was after twelve. Ann wouldn't know why he hadn't showed up. Jones would tell her he was scared and had ducked out. He'd been mighty cute, Hap Jones had. He'd fixed a big doubt in Frank Logan's mind. Worse than that, he'd be fixing up a big doubt in Ann's mind. Chances were Bert wouldn't be able to take her to the dance, but Jones would be on hand. He'd keep working on that doubt. Then when Bert got up nerve enough to tell her they weren't getting married this fall . . . He groaned. He couldn't think past that.

IN A SUDDEN gust of temper, Bert jerked on his cell door. He rattled the bars in the window. He kicked at the wall and ran his toes into his foot. Solid. A man didn't leave this jail just by pulling the bars out by the roots.

Bert sat down on the cot. He swore. There was nothing to do but cool his heels until Hap Jones got good and ready to let him out. That might be quite awhile. Between them Jones and Roper could cook up a yarn about how Bert had resisted arrest. Or disturbed the peace. Or attacked an officer.

Bert got up and stared out of the cell window. The crowd had thinned on Main Street. Everybody was heading for the rodeo grounds. He sat down again and smoked a cigarette. He paced the floor. Of all the damned underhanded tricks a lawman could pull off, Jones had pulled off the damndest and most underhanded.

Bert went back to the window. The street was empty. He could hear the



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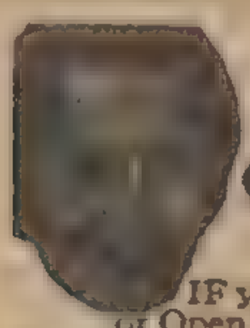
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yelling from the rodeo grounds. Probably Midnight had pitched a buckaroo out of his saddle. Then Bert forgot about the rodeo. A bearded man was driving a buckboard into town along the Yellow Fork road. He was small and scraggly-toothed and vaguely familiar. When he was opposite the jail he turned his head to spit. Bert had a good look. He was Chick Louderman.

A squeeze came to Bert's stomach muscles. The setup was perfect for the Loudermans and Chick was too smart to miss it. Hap Jones was at the rodeo with Ann. Sam Roper would be there. Probably Frank Logan was there. Chances were, outside of old man Hince in the store and Bob Miller, the bank teller, there wasn't a man on Main Street. The whole town had moved out to the rodeo grounds.

Bert watched Chick Louderman stop in front of Hince's store and go in. They were smart, these Loudermans. That's why they'd gone unhung so long. They had a hideout in the Yellow Fork Hotel thirty miles or more upstream from South Valley. Bert had seen them there a couple of times. Plenty of folks along the Yellow Fork knew about it. Hap Jones could have smoked the Loudermans out if he'd wanted to. The whole thing was he hadn't strained his eyes looking. They were too tough for him and he knew it.

It was a smart scheme. Bert saw that as soon as Chick Louderman had pulled out of town, his buckboard loaded with sacks of grain. His dust hadn't settled until his brothers, Abe and Ross, rode in, racked their mounts and walked into the bank.

The younger Loudermans were nothing like Chick. Abe was big, coarse-featured, and entirely bald; Ross was tall, long-necked, and a little stooped. Chick did the planning, the other two carried out his plans. Part of their success was due to Chick's shrewdness, part to the fact that they looked like ordinary cowmen and not at all like notorious outlaws.

Abe and Ross had been in the bank

ten minutes or more when Bert heard a gunshot. Hince ran out of his store, a Winchester in his hands, and went down before Abe's gun. Then the outlaws were in the saddle, arms filled with bulging coin sacks, and slapping steel to their mounts.

Savage anger boiled high in Bert. All he could do was to stand here and watch Hince get shot. Fine old gent, Hince was. Chances were Bob Miller, the bank teller, was dead. Another good man. And all the time Jones was sitting in the grandstand talking to Ann. If he knew so much about the Loudermans, why hadn't he posted Sam Roper along Main Street?

HINCE wasn't dead. He struggled to his hands and knees, and pulling the rifle to his shoulder, drove a half-dozen bullets after the fleeing Loudermans. Then strength went out of him, and he fell full out.

The gunfire brought a crowd streaming from the rodeo grounds, Hap Jones and Sam Roper in front, Frank Logan puffing behind them.

Jones yelled, "Get the Doc. Hince is still alive."

Logan ran into the bank. A moment later he came out, visibly shaken. "They killed Miller," he yelled. "Cleaned the safe out. Get after them, Jones."

"We'll get 'em," Jones called, and started running toward the jail. "They won't get far loaded down with that much gold."

But Abe and Ross wouldn't be loaded with gold, only Hap Jones wasn't smart enough to catch on. He'd take his posse right past Chick Louderman's buckboard. Bert had a short wrestle with his conscience, and his conscience won. He rattled the door. He yelled. Jones poked his head out of his office and bellowed:

"Behave, Hammer, or I'll work you over when I get back. I ain't letting you out to shoot us in the back when we catch up with the Loudermans."

Jones slammed the door shut. Bert moved over to the window, cursing Jones for his mule-headedness, and watched

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the posse leave town. He made a bet with himself that they'd be back, come dark, empty-handed.

Bert lost his bet on time. It was close to midnight when the weary posse straggled back into town. Frank Logan was waiting in front of the jail. When he saw that Jones had no prisoners, he said disgustedly, "You're a hell of a lawman. You know what it means to this county if my bank goes under?"

The sheriff tramped into his office, cursing. Logan followed, and presently Bert heard Jones bellow, "Shut up, Logan. I couldn't catch 'em. A man can't do no more than his best."

Bert began rattling the door again. Jones came out of his office and along the corridor, temper honed thin by weariness and disappointment. He raged, "I told you to behave. Now I'm going to work you over."

"Logan," Bert called. "Get me out of here and I'll get your money back."

The banker appeared in the doorway, his fat body almost filling it. He said curiously, "How are you going to get any money back?"

"Get me out of here. I'm not quite as mutton-headed as Jones."

"Hammer, I'm going to—" Jones squalled.

"Shut up, Hap." Logan came along the corridor, his fat face showing interest. "What makes you think you can get the money back?"

"Because I'm not real slow in the head like Hap is. If I'd been running the posse, I'd have stopped and searched that buckboard he passed just out of town. You didn't think of that, did you, Hap? You saw a couple of riders down the road, so you took after 'em. Did they ride like they were loaded down with gold, Hap?"

Jones's eyes widened. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, looked at Logan and then at Bert, and began to curse.

"You're a fool," Logan said disgustedly.

"How'd you know what happened if you wasn't in this up to your neck?"

Jones demanded.

"Because I stood at the window and watched. I tried to tell you before you started out, but you wouldn't listen. You were so damned anxious to make a hit with Ann and keep me penned up so I couldn't ride Midnight you couldn't think straight." Bert nodded at Logan.

LOGAN was scratching his head thoughtfully. "You sure didn't tip the Loudermans off," he admitted. "Just how are you aiming to get this money?"

"Let me out of here and I'll get it. A man's got to have some pride. I didn't get a chance to ride Midnight, but I reckon coming back with the Loudermans would be just as good."

"There's three of them—"

"They ain't real handy with their guns," Bert broke in. "They're good because they're smart. If I can get 'em into the open, I can handle 'em."

"You ain't going nowhere," Jones snarled. "I ain't real sure—"

"I've heard enough hogwash out of you," Logan said. "Let him out."

"You ain't running this sheriff's office," Jones muttered.

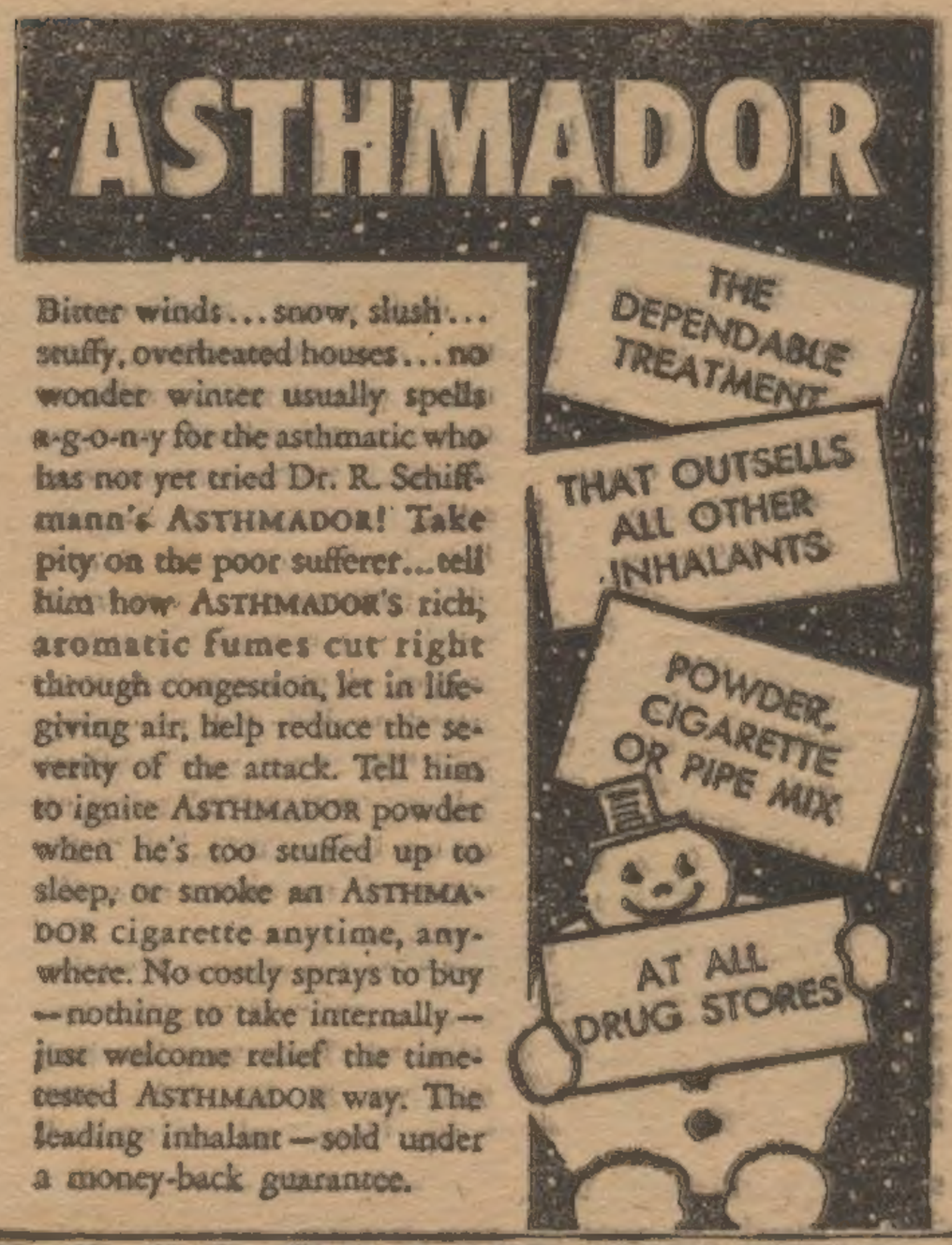
"It's time I started." Logan leveled a finger at Jones. "You let Hammer out, or I'll get the county court together. I'll have that star off you in twenty-four hours. When a man uses his office for his own private reasons like you've done today, it's time he got out."

It was dusk when Bert rode back into South Valley, the body of Chick Louderman lashed across a saddle. Abe and Ross were wounded, but able to ride. Bert was leading a pack horse loaded with the bank's gold.

"Got 'em in the Yellow Fork Hotel," Bert told the crowd. "Chick made a mistake and went for his gun."

"If you'd gone up the stairs after 'em," a man shouted, "they'd have filled your hide full of holes. How'd you get 'em to where you could handle 'em?"

"They came after me," Bert said laconically. "We tangled in the bar." He saw Logan then, and motioned to the pack horse. "There's your stolen dinero."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Logan elbowed through the crowd to where Bert stood in front of the jail. He said, "I don't have any authority to give you a reward, Bert, but there's one thing I do have authority to do. You can get a loan to buy all the feeders you want."

"Thanks. I'm sure gonna be happy telling that to Ann." He saw Jones come out of the jail then, and he moved quickly to him. "I've got something for you, Hap. Maybe you'll be smart enough to leave Ann alone."

Bert hit Jones on the side of the head, ducked a looping blow, drove wind out of him in a hissing sigh, and knocked him cold with a short right that caught him flush on the chin. Drawing his gun, Bert yelled, "Roper, I've got something for you, too." But Roper had gone.

Bert stepped back into the saddle and rode through the crowd. When he dismounted in front of Ann's place, she ran down the path to meet him.

"I knew you'd be back," Ann cried. "Mr. Logan told me why you didn't ride Midnight. I'm never going to speak to Hap Jones again as long as I live."

"You'd better not because I'm throwing a loop on you tomorrow. After that I'm not going to like the idea of my wife speaking to that jayhoo.

"Not tomorrow . . ." Ann began, but didn't have a real chance to argue because Bert stopped the conversation with a kiss. It took some time to do the job thoroughly. When he was done, Ann was out of the notion of arguing. She just murmured, "Tomorrow."

Bert told her about the loan and his plans for another room and the feeders he was going to buy, and Ann thought that was fine. "Only don't ever go after three men like the Loudermans again."

"Why, it wasn't so hard. I just walked into the Yellow Fork Hotel and told the barkeep the Loudermans didn't get away with thirty-two thousand. I said it was just half of that. Soon as somebody got word to the Loudermans what I was saying, they came downstairs to poke the lie down my throat. They had a lot of pride in their work, them gents did."

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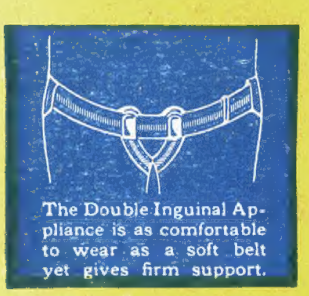

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